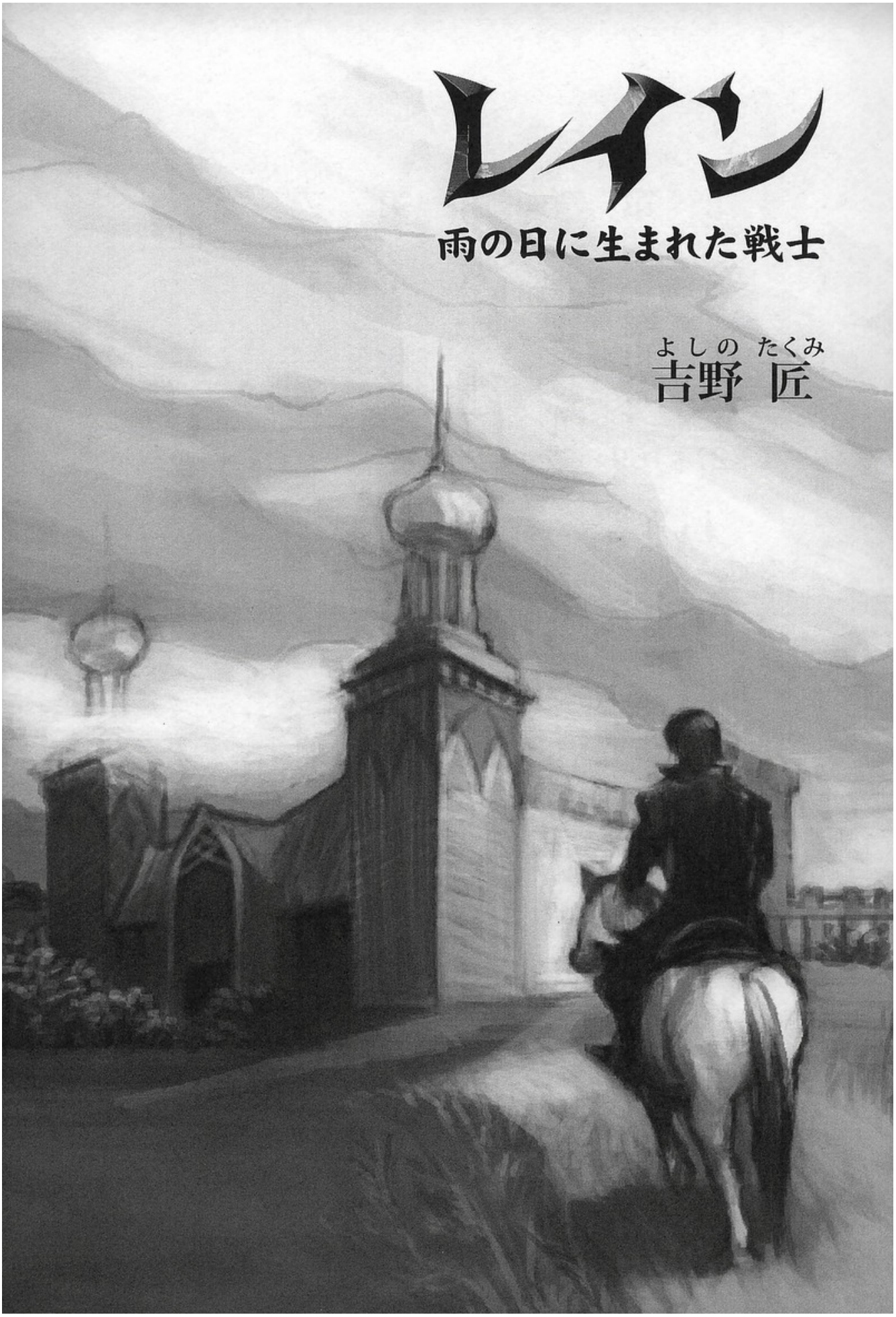
レイン
雨の日に生まれた戦士
よしの たくみ
吉野 匠

Rain: Warrior Born on a Rainy Day

-Intro-

Murgenia, a continent located in a different world.

Not yet fallen to the hands of the Scientific Revolution, this land continues to pass down with care the fading magics of its ancient days.

It is a world ruled by sword and sorcery—

☆☆☆

A long time has passed since the war which engulfed the whole of Murgenia. Yet the precariously maintained balance of peace approaches its end.

Zarmine, a large kingdom located in the northern part of the continent has been reborn with the coming of its new king.

Unsatisfied with the small power he wields, the desire for conquest consumes him.
Under orders from this king who knows no equal, the Dark Army begins its invasion, turning many countries to the flames of war.

Among those preparing for invasion is a small country located to the south west of the continent, known as Sunkwoll.

The military strength is not even one tenth that of a large country. The will of the soldiers shakes.

The king pours out lavish luxuries upon the nobility, without regard to the welfare of his people.

It seems as though the destruction of this small, weak country Sunkwoll… is imminent.

Prologue

Taking a walk through the back courtyard of his palace, King Leygur stopped suddenly, sensing a presence.

The sentinels supposedly guarding the area had disappeared at some point, and in their place several men he was quite familiar with entered into the center of the courtyard.

They were generals who served Zarmine, and were vassals to Leygur.

Yet their expressions which had always shown a sort of forced respect, had vanished to be replaced with that of a murdering intent…

“Hoh. You seem to be saving me some time. For you to betray yourselves like this.”

Brushing up his long silver hair which concealed one of his eyes, Leygur’s gaze narrowed.

An expression that would freeze ice took hold of his stunningly handsome face.

To this face which showed not a hint of faltering, the four generals who held pride in their battle experience unknowingly shifted, as though wanting to move away.

But the one leading the group, a man in his forties by the name of Arvin spoke up in a loud voice.

“Silence! We have born the burden of living under your direction ever since you killed the last King and took his place. However! We have reached our limit. No longer can we look away as you bring your escapades of tyranny upon this land!”

The remaining three raised their voices in consent. Drawn along by the moment, each of the men drew his sword. The four long-swords glinted as one in the light reflected off of their blades.

Yet Leygur’s composure never wavered.

Judging from his outward appearance he was in his twenties, and compared to the generals should be inexperienced, but all that he said was “Worthless.”

“What!?”

“Do you really believe that even with your combined efforts you have a chance of killing me? I never knew you were such fools. That being said, I’ll gladly accept this opportunity to rid myself of some stress.”

He gazed at the four men as though they were merely objects.

“What I seek now is one who has surpassed all others and… no.”

He broke off suddenly, laughing.

“Forget surpassing all others, its someone who can take down the strongest of the legendary beasts that I want as my subordinate. Those as mediocre as yourselves, who can’t even measure their own potential are unnecessary. Especially for the plan that will soon be put into action.”

At the kings words, the four men knitted their eyebrows.

If you mention the strongest legendary beast, your talking about the Millennium Dragons that had lived for thousands of years, and if so then the men Leygur was referring to were the Dragon Slayers.

They were a legend within legends.

It’s said that to one who can defeat a dragon in solo combat, to him will be given all the strength possessed by that legendary beast.

…Of course, at the most that was only a legend.

“Such idiocy. You’re crazed after all. We should have done this a long time ago.” spat Piers, one of the four.

A cold smile played across Leygur’s face.

“Idiocy… No matter. In the end all of you will die here. Telling you anything about what is going to come next… would be pointless—-”

Just as he finished speaking, Leygur moved.

The sound of metal sliding along metal.

An ominous crimson light reflected in the eyes of the four traitors.

The magic sword drawn from its sheath gave off a glowing red aura the color of blood. And of the four, he closed the distance on Piers in an instant.

It was a speed that went beyond human ability.

All that the battle hardened Piers managed to do, was lift his sword.

It was a speed that had an impossible force behind it, yet Leygur had hardly seemed to have moved.

The sword swung down as though it were lightning, cutting Piers sword in half and continuing through.

Leygur quickly regained his distance. In one moment the armor protecting Piers' body was broken to pieces. A fountain of fresh blood sprayed outwards, raining out upon the remaining three.

Unconsciously Arvin took several steps back, sucking in his breath. As though it meant nothing at all, Leygur raised his hand a second time, calling on the sword.

"Mage Light!"

Upon those words, a blindingly white light of magical power exploded, flowing outward in a torrent under Leygur's command.

Arvin who had backed away took the light full on. He fell to the ground as his chest turned the color of charcoal.

The remaining two retreated quickly from the still smoking corpse.

"Ma, magic!? He didn't even chant a rune!"

"There isn't a way in hell that was something a human could do! You couldn't be—–"

Leygur never gave them the chance to speak.

Again effortlessly closing the distance, he commanded the sword again and swinging horizontally cut through the two.

They never had a moment to scream in pain.

All of them having received fatal wounds, died instantly. Their eyes gazed lifelessly up at the open sky, as their blood seeped into the ground around where they had fallen.

In life, their bravery and deeds as generals had been acknowledged by all.

But in a matter of ten seconds, they had all become lifeless bodies devoid of speech.

Leygur's expression never changed as he slid his prized magical sword 'Justice' back into its sheath.

Without giving the dead a second glance, Leygur turned his gaze towards the heavens.

"Well. I believe I'll need to look for some new underlings. Yet whether or not there is someone worth searching for in this world…"

Speaking aloud to nobody in particular, Leygur twisted his lips.

Well, it wasn't as though there were no candidates.

Perhaps the time had come to put *him* to the test…

Chapter 1: Rain, Under House Arrest

The main fortress of Sunkwoll, Galfort Castle.

A great number of retainers were gathered in the scarlet carpeted hall.

Today, a meeting of the generals was being held.

King Douglas sat in his throne, elevated above the civil servants and military officers spread out before him to the left and the right according to their respective wards.

A majority of them had blond hair and blue eyes… in other words they were the nobility.

Only Rain, kneeling before the king had a different appearance with his black hair and eyes.

As always his eyes seemed to glint mischievously.

No matter the circumstance, he was the kind of man to have the expression of someone who would get into trouble, and it was no different now.

At the very least, that was how Ralphus saw him.

Ralphus was a man who had a stern countenance, and a petite figure. There were no similarities with Rain.

Under ordinary circumstances he had a face which would make the temperature of all the ladies in the room rise, though now it was his face that was flushed with color.

Rain, won't you stop it already—Unfortunately his prayer never reached his friend.

"As I have explained to you before, walking right into what Zarmine has planned for us is not a proper military strategy. It's careless to send our soldiers out in this circumstance. Clashing would be the same as jumping head first into a well laid out trap."

Rain's raised voice was laced with sarcasm.

King Douglas's eyes burned fiercely as he glared at this arrogance.

"Rain! Just what purpose do you have with those words! You are not just disagreeing with my plan of battle, you are taking it lightly!"

King Douglas, his cheek scarred from an old wound, shook violently in his anger.

The officials around him shivered but Rain, who was the actual object of this anger, showed no response. Yet, as though he were enjoying himself, the corners of his mouth were upturned in a faint smile.

It wasn't just his courage… though that itself could be said to be very great.

Ralphus tried making eye contact, but his friend was already turned, facing the front.

And yet again he made an admonition… or perhaps you could call it a complaint.

“Battle strategy? Your Majesty, I don’t believe you could call a plan where ten-thousand of our troops go head to head with forty-thousand enemies, a battle strategy. However, if it was suicide you were after, then it seems a rather certain way to go about it.”

“What!?”

King Douglas ground his teeth ferociously. It seemed his tolerance was wearing thin.

Ralphus had no idea what Rain was trying to accomplish. Of all people Rain should know just how short the King’s fuse was. At this rate it was nothing to joke about. Rain was going to end up beheaded.

Is that how dissatisfied you are with this decision, Rain?

_____

The strong kingdom Zarmine to the north of the continent had devastated Lunan only half a year earlier.

It was a country bordering Sunkwoll to the north, and for a long time had been at odds with them. But before Zarmine, there hadn’t been a chance.

Even though the number of their enemies had lessened, there was no time for celebrating.

However you looked at it, the next target Zarmine would aim for, would most certainly be the small country in the south west corner of the continent, in other words it was none other than this country, Sunkwoll.

As soon as Lunan had fallen, they had immediately started to strengthen their defenses, in hopes of preventing spies from entering. Currently the generals were preparing for war and gathering mercenaries under the command of the King.

At the end of last month, just as it had been assumed, King Leygur finally began mobilizing his impossibly large army for their next expedition.

Under orders of Leygur’s officers, they had begun moving to the south. Even a child could tell you their objective was Sunkwoll.

King Douglas, having decided to use a surprise attack to defeat the impending army in one stroke, had ordered for the seven generals to prepare for war.

Besides Ralphus, the other generals had begun preparing mercenaries and bringing them into Galfort Castle.

——Rain was the only one ignoring that order, and making a scene by himself. This alone was enough to get him a severe punishment.

Beyond that, his wording bordered on rebellion… it was no shock that Ralphus would be agitated.

_____

"Rain! I have bestowed upon you the title of a general even though you come from common blood! I even gave to you land of the highest qual…!"

In his anger the King chocked on his words. Alternately Rain's response was light.

"Yeah. I'm pretty thankful for that."

No matter how you heard hit, he didn't sound appreciative in the least. Alternately it seemed as though he were making fun of the King.

"Why you! Such impudence! Then why! Why won't you follow orders!"

There was the sound of a heavy sigh.

Of course it was Rain.

"It's as I have already said. I am opposed to charging at the enemy with inferior military might and no plan. I wouldn't be able to have you understand?"

He shook his head as if to emphasize the futility of the request.

"Taking a small regiment to collide with a large enemy force and fall gloriously——To someone like myself who worked their way up from a hired mercenary, I have no interest in dying honorably for such a war strategy."

"What do you mean 'I've no interest' you fool! Your view is of no importance!"

Voices backing the king could be heard scattered throughout the hall.

It was five voices of all the generals, excluding Ralphus. Rain's reputation among his peers was quite bad. But the man himself paid no attention.

"The land which once was Lunan is already under Zarmine control, making it enemy land. I can't call us coolly marching through to perform a surprise attack sanity."

"How dare you! Is that how you talk to your Ruler!"

Shing!

King Douglas removed his sword from its sheath.

He rose from his throne, taking large steps to close the distance between him and Rain. A voice resounded in the room, followed by a ringing as though the anticipation of what would happen next was palpable.

There was no way this could be left unchecked!

Ralphus moved quickly from his position to act as a shield in front of Rain, kneeling to the King.

“Please wait, your Majesty!”

“Out of the way, Ralphus! Today of all days there will be no pardon!”

“Even so cutting him here… it’s going too far, is it not!”

“Be silent, Ralphus!”

“No, I cannot remain silent!”

With the full force of his will behind his voice, silence filled the hall. Perhaps surprised by this action even the King lowered his blade.

Ralphus was always a calm man, but occasionally he was known to act altogether differently, as though he were a different person. Right now was one of those times.

Ralphus composed himself and without missing a beat continued.

“Very soon we will be entering into battle, and let’s say you cut down one of your allies. Please think for a moment.”

Replacing the King who had fallen silent in contemplation, the counter came from another.

His cheeks drawn in, one of the generals, Ganoa, had spoken.

“Lord Ralphus, even if you are trying to protect your friend, is not your action too much in the way of refuting His Majesty?”

——In other words, Shut-it and watch! is what he wanted to say.

Lord Gilles beside him nodded in agreement. Differing from the slim yet sturdy countenance of Ganoa, Gilles was as round as a barrel. Both of them had strong ties to nobility and its traditions, and were on the worst of terms with Rain.

There was no doubt they were heatedly hoping that Rain would be cut down and die. Ralphus was also from a long line of nobility dating back to the start of the Kingdom, and had always disliked these two.

“Fools!”

He cut in.

“If Rain were to die here, the only ones rejoicing would be our enemies! Don’t you see this!?”

Ganoa made as though he were about to say something in retort, but closed his open mouth after seeing the expression in Ralphus’s eyes. It was the same for Gilles.

With a pained expression King Douglas returned his sword to its scabbard. He probably felt as though that last statement had been directed at himself. He returned to his throne with large strides, staring irritatedly at Ralphus and Rain as he sat.

“It’s over. What would be gained from his execution.”

“Right, that’s it.”

Rain said lightly, as though he were speaking about someone else.

Deep wrinkles etched themselves between the King’s eyebrows.

Ralphus held up a hand, as though telling Rain to be quiet.

He knelt beside his friend.

“Your Majesty, I thank you deeply for you understanding… However, though he leads soldiers, he came here with none.”

“Ignoring an order is still ignoring an order. It might happen again.”

There is no way his crime can be completely overlooked.”

“That’s true but…”

Ralphus, struggling with the situation threw a glance at Rain, but all he received in return was a look that seemed to say ‘It doesn’t concern me.’

Even though it concerned him, he just couldn’t take it seriously.

Ralphus continued exasperatedly.

“Your Majesty, how do you find ordering Rain to be put under house arrest, instead?”

“Hrmm. House arrest…”

“Yes. For this fight there is no way to know when events will unfold, so I believe this to be the best solution.”

“I see……”

King Douglas stroked his beard, his expression contemplating.

He didn’t like it, but because of Ralphus’s standing as a high ranking noble with great authority, he couldn’t refuse the suggestion out of hand.

Even though he was King, he had an inferiority in ancestry when compared with Ralphus’s noble bloodline.

“Yet I find it lacking in terms of punishment.”

The King’s reply was thick in his throat.

“That is not so.”

Ralphus lost no time in pushing something he himself did not believe.

“If Your Majesty leads us into complete victory against Zarmine, then even Rain cannot continue to refute the fact that there are things even he doesn’t know. He will also lose face against us as well.
There is no harsher punishment for a warrior who has made a name for himself than this.”
Rain seemed about to snort through his nose at the comment about a warrior’s honor, but even so that was how Ralphus worded it.

“Hrmm….Well, that is…”

“So let us proceed as such. Your Majesty, your decision please.”

Urged such, the King gave his order as though he had just chewed on sand.

“Well then, so be it. Rain, you are to be kept under house arrest in your fortress. You should be grateful that your punishment is no more severe than this!”

“Haha! I am truly thankful and joyous!!”

With a magnificently boisterous voice, Rain lowered his head in a gesture that was merely physical.

He glanced to the side at Ralphus, also with his head lowered, and winked, smiling brightly.

No way, he hadn't planned on things turning out this way, had he…

It that was the case there was no helping him.

Ralphus could only give a pained smile.

But, well… for a close friend to be safe, there really was nothing better.

Because no matter how one looked at it, there really was no hope of winning.

At that moment both Ganoa and Gilles looked at him with cold eyes. Whether it was good fortune or bad, Ralphus never noticed.

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Without any more opinions being offered, the meeting came to a close soon after.

Ralphus invited Rain to a private room within the castle.

If war was next, then this could be their last parting.

"Would you care for a drink?"

"Ah, now that sounds like a plan."

Rain laughed refreshingly.

Entering the room, Rain sat down heavily upon the sofa.

He crossed his legs high in the air, kicking off his shoes.

Ralphus took a bottle of alcohol and two glasses from a cabinet atop the bookcase, filling them to the brim.

After pouring, he took a seat across from Rain.

Finishing it in one go, Rain poured himself another round.

It was the way he always drank.

Ralphus tilted the glass to his lips, drinking slowly as he contemplated his friends face.

He had a young countenance, unchanged from the first time they had met.

At the very least, though he was twenty-five, the same age as Ralphus, he didn't look it.

He looked to be about eighteen or twenty.

There was a rumor that Ralphus, in whose veins flowed the blood of the founding nobles, was descended from elves. The lifespan of which is longer than man, and their aging also is slower. But as to why his friend should appear so young, Ralphus could only guess.

As he thought about it, he realized just how much he didn't know about Rain.

Just then Rain spoke.

"By the way, sorry about earlier."

"What are you talking about? You aren't talking about the house arrest are you? I see, you were counting on my intervention weren't you?"

"Yeah, I'd planned for it."

"In that case you should have told me beforehand. What would you have done had I not jumped in to stop His Majesty?"

"I trusted you would definitely stop him for me. Besides, how could I confide in someone who is a terrible actor?"

"Hmph. That is true though."

Ralphus understood completely.

Most certainly if he had heard ahead of time, it would have showed up on his face.

"Still I couldn't believe you would be so opposed to this war. Do you really think there's no way to win the upcoming expedition?"

"At this rate there isn't even the tip of a pinky finger in plans that would help."

Rain's response was direct and guaranteed.

"This is completely and totally Zarmine's trap. The speed of mobilizing our army being so slow also seems a determining factor. After walking right into the bosom of the enemy, the idea is to rip them apart from the inside?"

"……Seems that way. It's just, if that's the plan then what do you think we should do? Even if we left them alone, one day they will come to invade."

"In that case we would defend ourselves in our land, Sunkwoll. Only if things came to that, either you or I would have to come up with the military strategy. On top of that, we would be

responsible for mobilizing and directing troops…"

"That's….but…."

Ralphus frowned.

King Douglas intensely disliked anyone giving him advice on military strategy.

Unless it dealt with something other than battle, the King wouldn't even try to ask for Ralphus's opinion.

"You know that's impossible. Then there's nothing to be done. It's over. Basically because this is a world-wide conflict, it's the numbers that give the commands."

"—Yeah."

His last response was rather weak, but he understood what Rain was saying.

The analysis was cold but accurate.

Putting aside King Douglas's personal skills, his ability to look at the entire situation and develop an appropriate strategy was lacking.

No matter how you looked at it, the end was predictable.

"Putting all that aside for the moment. I am not the type to throw away my life mindlessly following His Majesty. Especially for something like a special attack when there is no chance of victory."

Ralphus tilted his glass in silence.

At least what he was saying was not wrong, even if the way he said it put others on edge.

The King's harsh orders had often driven Rain into difficult situations, and it would be strange to see him sacrifice himself for the King, given all that.

First off, there is no basis for any kind of faithfulness towards the kingdom for someone who had once been a mercenary.

Depending on the situation, there might not be any at all.

But all people were different.

If there were fools who would plant their feet in the ground and remain to fight, then that was alright….

Rain stared intently at Ralphus.

"……With an expression like that, advising you to remain away from the expedition would be pointless, huh."

"Yeah. I'm glad that you're worried about me though."

"—not really. Only, not having someone around to banter with is disappointing, that's all."

"I see."

Ralphus laughed quietly.

Draining the last of his glass, Rain stood up abruptly.

"Well then. It's about time I head out. After all, I am under house arrest."

"Yeah. Be sure to take good care of yourself, would you. It might be wasted words on you though."

"Nah, you're the one who has to take better care of themselves."

For just a moment Ralphus thought he caught a glimpse of Rain's apprehension, but in the next moment it was gone.

Without showing a hint of his dampened emotions, he left the room as though leaving an important meeting that was still in progress.

Ralphus followed him into the hall to see him off.

"That's right."

Stopping in his tracks, Rain turned around, remembering something.

"I wanted to ask you before but, do you know a girl named Michelle? She'd be about sixteen, and is of noble blood."

"Michelle? Can't say….Is there some special trait besides a name you can give me?"

"Let me see… She has straight blond hair that goes down to her waist, and a face so pretty it's hard to believe…her voice is pretty too."

"With a description like that it's a little hard to place. There are a large number of nobles, after all."

Ralphus said, sounding not a little irritated.

“But no matter how I look at it there is just too much of a gap between your ages. Certainly I may not know a lot about relationships between a man and a woman, but…”

“NO! Don’t misunderstand me! It’s not like that. I’m not interested in that. It’s just, there’s a promise I’ve made.”

“A promise?”

“Nothing. If you don’t know it doesn’t matter. Also I kinda know a place we might be able to meet.”
Waving his hand to dismiss the matter, Rain turned and continue walking away as though it were nothing.

He never once looked back.

Returning to the private quarters, Ralphus drank away the thoughts of his departed friend.

His thoughts turned to the unfavorable battle before him, and without a great movement in his destiny, he would probably never see that carefree man again…

Thud Thud

Deeply submerged in his thoughts, Ralphus heard timid knocking at the door.

With this level of timidity, it was hard to think it could be the aide, Gwen.

“Come in. … The——Princess!”

Opening the door easily, and standing on the other side was Princess Shelfa.

Blond hair reached down to her waist, and her skin was so pale it was almost transparent.

Her eyes which were one size larger than any one else's, were so cute they made one feel like a lowly subordinate, entranced by their lucidity.

Today her expression was excited, different from her usual, lonely expression.

To Ralphus who had reflexively gone down on one knee, she extended a small hand.

“You needn’t pay heed, Sir Ralphus. Uhm… Do you have a moment?”

“Of course. Please, go ahead.”

Lost in his confusion, Ralphus beckoned the Princess to enter.

He had heard that she had quite a dislike for people, so what she wanted with him.…

The princess had turned 16 this year, though Ralphus had never really become acquainted.

At most, when they had crossed paths in the palace he had bowed to her.

It wasn't that Ralphus had been purposely avoiding her, it's simply that the Princess was always in the inner rooms of the palace.

Though it seemed it wasn't her decision, but that of her father, King Douglas.

Still, this meeting was unexpected.

Sitting on the sofa, the Princess looked around the room as if she were looking for something.

"So, what brings the Princess here?"

"Well… Is it true that you, Ralphus, are a friend of Rain? At least that's what I've heard from the female attendants."

"….Yes, it's true that he is a friend of mine."

To call Rain by his name? It seems overly familiar…

Ralphus grew further confused about the situation.

"Then, you wouldn't happen to know where he is, would you? He should have come to the palace, but no matter where I search, I can't find him."

Ralphus must have had an expression that said "uncommon things happen," on his face.

In a small voice Shelfa added,

"It's a secret from Father. I snuck out of my chambers after all. I just really wanted to meet Rain."

"——I see. To meet Rain."

That is all he could muster in response.

The beautiful face of the Princess who was speaking openly with him, flushed red.

Whoever looked at her, it wasn't hard to see how important Rain was to her.

That guy, when did he become acquainted with her?

It was one of those mysteries.

In the first place, Rain hardly ever came to Galfort Castle.

“He was just here until a moment ago… but as he’s been placed under house arrest, I’m afraid he has returned to his castle.”

Ralphus worried that this young girl might burst out into tears from this news.

“It can’t be helped. Perhaps it is best for him that things turned out this way.”

Sympathizing with her, Ralphus told her in detail about the events of the meeting and how Rain had been placed under house arrest, warning her not to tell anyone.

He told her everything, including Rain’s aim in doing so.

“I… see. If Rain is taking that course of action, then there must be no hope left for this country.”

In her words, a sense of absolute trust in Rain was conveyed.

“Though it is something one doesn’t want to admit.”

“Very true.”

Giving a deep sigh, the Princess for some reason pulled out a pendant from within the bosom of her white robes, looking intently at it.

Attached to a silver chain was an old coin with a hole to attach it.

Realizing Ralphus’s stare, she held out the coin in a white hand for him to see.

“I will show it to you special, because you are a friend of Rain’s.”

This coin I received from Rain, is my treasure.”

“It is an honor. It seems to be a very old item, yes? It doesn’t seem to be something of much value though.”

It would have been more appropriate to call it worn out rather than old.

It looked like an average silver coin, but on the dingy surface were words carved in a language Rain probably knew.

“This is a magic coin.”

“Magic, you say?”

“Mhmm. Because of a promise he couldn’t tell me what sort of effect the coin has, but whenever I

am upset and look at it, I become energetic again. It's just he told me the magic would only work once."

A magic item was so scarce in this day and age, that the value would be tremendous.

The main reason was that the Rune Masters, people who could imbue items with magical abilities, were almost non-existent anymore.

But something didn't sit well with him….Ralphus felt a shiver run down his spine.

Actually Ralphus himself had received a magical item before.

It was a time when they were still at war with Lunan.

After having received an order from the King to march out to the battlefield, Ralphus had spent the night before he was to leave drinking with Rain, and it was then that Rain told him he would give him something nice.

"Something nice?"

"Yep. It's something I found by chance while exploring some ruins in the Northern Lands….well, just take a look."

What he held out was, no matter how you looked at it, a piece of a rock.

Yet there was a tinge of green.

"Hmm? I see nothing but an ordinary stone though."

"Ah, that's why amateurs are such…This is something you can only use once, but when the bearer is in mortal danger, it will bear that danger instead. It's true, I'm not lying."

"Well well!"

Ralphus let out an impressed laugh.

"I'll give it to you as a precaution. Take it with you when you go to fight. Don't sweat it, don't sweat it. You don't have to be so reserved. In return for it, tonight's drinks are on you."

One last time Rain told him he wasn't lying.

Ralphus was very grateful, and brought the stone with him to the battlefield.

He even thought the stone had helped him.

In the midst of a terrible battle, an enemy arrow had pierced his neck.

But, just by applying a small bandage to his neck, he had escaped a dangerous situation.

Afterward, he couldn't find the stone and so had completely thought it was thanks to it.

It was just that upon returning, Ralphus invited Rain out to drink with him to convey his gratitude, when Rain responded, saying

"Oh. That was just a stone. It was something I picked up off the roadside."

"….What was that?!"

"Geez, no need to get upset. After all, it gave you courage didn't it. Battles are, whats the expression, fought from the strength of the heart, or something. But wow, isn't that great! It's a happy ending!"

Giving him a thunderous pat on the back, Ralphus spewed his drink all over….

Reflecting back on that time, Ralphus cleared his throat.

Fearfully he asked the Princess, who was beaming with joy.

"By the way Princess, Rain didn't happen to mention anything about that silver coin, did he?"

The Princess blinked several times before responding,

"Let's see… Rain seems to have seen the other side of the world, and in regards to this item, said that he found it quite by accident while exploring some ruins in the Northern Lands."

"I, I see!"

That dirty little!

Ralphus broke out into a cold sweat.

Not recognizing Ralphus's internal struggle, the Princess continued happily.

"Rain is really strange you know. It's not like I ever doubted him or anything, but he just kept insisting he wasn't lying."

"Ha, hah…..that really is strange….haha, hahaha."

She brought her hand daintily to her lips, still laughing gently, but Ralphus wasn't the least bit taken in.

All the alcohol he had imbibed earlier turned into sweat.

At the very least, he decided to change the topic.

If he ever had a chance to meet with Rain again, that was something he would most definitely ask.

“Well, if it’s ability can only be used once, I think it would be wise to keep it safe and save it, don’t you?”

“Yes, I feel the same way.”

“I am relieved to hear that.”

“Why?”

“Ah, it’s n, nothing. That’s right. Princess, would you happen to know someone by the name of Michelle?”

It was a name he gave without much thought in order to change the topic, but the Princess jumped in astonishment.

“Why do you know that name? Rain!? You heard it from Rain, didn’t you.”

All he could do was nod feebly in the face of such force.

If the Princess had romantic feelings for Rain, then he never should have brought up another woman’s name.

But contrary to his expectations, the Princess smiled in much the same manner as a flower opening it’s petals.

She gently folded her hands, and spoke as though seeing a dream.

“Rain has been thinking of Michelle, hasn’t he, Sir Ralphus.”

“Well….I s, suppose. I was only asked if I knew her. Only that…”

It seemed the Princess wasn’t listening anymore.

Her cheeks colored as she said things like ‘I see,’ and ‘Rain did…’

She had completely turned into a day-dreaming maiden.
Most likely she wasn’t conscious of Ralphus anymore.

I just can’t understand women after all.

Ralphus thought to himself.

A faint whistling could be heard, riding on the wind.

Yet again Yuri thought about skipping a stone across the lakes surface from atop her horse, but for the sake of her mission, held herself back.

She was a girl of sixteen or seventeen, wearing a light blue blouse with a white skirt.

Black hair smooth enough to easily run her fingers though fell gracefully to her shoulders. Her eyes, which had the look of a squirrel searching for something, were glowing in victory. The person she was watching had a face many would regard as cute, but due to her current disgust with him, his ranking was quite low in her book.

…My word, how long does he intend to keep on singing so badly! On top of that, he's only wearing a shirt and pants even though it's so cold out. Lovers take heed, lovers!

There's no way someone can be this tone deaf! He was singing a song that would make anyone's ears sore. Apparently the lyrics told of the love between a man and a woman, but it only sounded like noise to her.

The more she listened, the more she felt as though her lifespan were shortening.

I can't believe it's this bad.

Holding back the urge to cover her ears, she maintained a constant distance and continued to follow the singer.

The man, Rain, one of the leading Generals of this country, was called the "unknown genius" in Zarmine.

Currently however, he was famous enough that only a few still called him such. At the very least, there was no mistake that he was highly regarded in other countries. His military exploits were sometimes called the greatest under heaven.

In fact, Yuri had been extremely nervous up until she had actually laid eyes on him. Now, there was no longer a fraction of awe left in her.

I want to just forget about this and go home—was what she was thinking, but since it was an order from the top, she couldn't just do as she pleased.

Yuri sighed deeply. In the end no matter how much she disliked it, she had to follow this man wherever he went.

Oblivious to Yuri's contemplations, Rain continued singing his song in a broken bell sort of voice, while riding atop his finely groomed white stallion.

He seemed to pay no heed to the fact that he was amidst shops in the very center of the merchants district of the capital city. He was completely ignoring the laughter, directed at him of the people walking along the main road. He might even be famous in a different meaning of the word.

Nevertheless, Yuri had no intention of getting involved with him, even for a fraction of a second.

Even now she was trying to put as much distance as possible between them so she wouldn't be mistaken as an acquaintance of his by those around. After all, someone like him was just a stranger to her.

Suddenly, Rain stopped his murderous singing, muttering something. Yuri bent her hears, listening intently.

"How about it Chris, you hungry?"

It was strange, but it was what she had heard.

She looked at the sky in exasperation.

Yet she kept hearing the same thing repeated again and again, so she couldn't just dismiss it by saying "Who's Chris? There isn't anybody else around, geez!"

Finally it dawned on her that Chris was the name of the horse he was riding. In other words, the genius swordsman, Rain, had a hobby of talking with healthy young horses.

He was a hard puzzle to figure out.

Why do I have to tail this guy that has useless rumors about him floating around?

Even though it was pointless no matter how much he talked, Rain kept speaking to his horse. It must have been a coincidence, but the horse shook it's head lightly.

Right after, Rain spoke, seemingly satisfied.

"Gotcha, gotcha. Food can wait til after, huh Chris."

Then, as though nothing had interrupted him, he began singing that murderous tune again.

Without thinking, Yuri uttered a curse under her breath. This was the first time she had ever thought a mission could be so totally pointless.

It wasn't just the song.

Besides, Rain was supposed to be one of the leading Generals, so why was he looking into each of the peasant's shops as he passed? The answer seemed to be that if the shop keeper was female,

Rain's interest increased with the beauty of the woman.

He wouldn't move on until he had spoken one or two words with them.

This guy's a loser who's got a weak spot for a pretty face.

Rain's rating in Yuri's book continued to worsen, deepening to a point where recovery seemed all but impossible.

As she was thinking this, Rain rode past a tavern, turning suddenly down a side street.

Yet again your planning on something like that…!

Closing the distance, Yuri hurriedly turned the corner after him.

"—! Aaah!"

She almost ran headlong into Rain.

He should have proceeded ahead, but instead he had dismounted and was leaning against the taverns wall. Looking at Yuri, he raised his hand and gave her a light greeting.

"Hey! Could we talk for a bit?"

Crap! He couldn't know I was tailing……no, wait…I can still fix this! He's an idiot after all.

Her face having finished cycling through a whirlwind of color, she adjusted her expression and took on the role of an innocent young girl. Opening her eyes as wide as they would go, she spoke.

"Wha?! You must have mistaken me for someone else, good Sir Knight."

"Mistaken…hmmm."

Rain gave Yuri a searching look, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it isn't much of a problem even if I'm mistaken. Could you dismount your horse for a moment? There's something I'd like to talk about."

She was only lost for a moment. There was no way she could be under suspicion at this point. In the end, she dismounted reluctantly.

"So, what is it?"

"Nothing really. Just, I'd like to hear the reason you've been 'coincidentally' following me ever since I left the castle."

Rain stressed the word *coincidentally*.

Yuri stiffened. He had been a laughing stock in her mind, but it seemed he had known ever since leaving Galfort Castle that she had been tailing him. Of course it would be impossible to clean this up as a 'simple coincidence.'

T, this could be bad…… Breaking out in sweat, Yuri began planning her next move.

"U, ummm…… I'll tell you because it's come to this, you see I, well I, had my heart stolen by you Sir Knight the moment I first saw you, and followed you because I wanted to be close to you."

Fighting the urge to grind her teeth, Yuri gathered herself together.

"Hoh, you fell for me at first sight, huh…" said Rain, laughing. Following his lead, Yuri let out a "tehehe," in response.

After laughing hard, Rain stopped abruptly, defying her statement.

"You little liar."

"Ehhh!? It's truuue! That handsome all black look."

"You can go on, can't you. Listen, it's true that I'm handsome."

What a self-conscious idiot, was added to Yuri's internal ranking of him.

"Even so, I just can't accept such a lame excuse."

"Ehh~, but I'm telling the truth, gee! I have completely, about you……"

Rain swiftly lifted one hand, and Yuri's mouth closed. After sighing resignedly, Rain went straight to the heart of the matter.

"Look, if you're going to feign ignorance, then I'll spell it out for you. You're really a spy for Zarmine, right? Be truthful about it."

I've been found out!

The moment she felt her cover had been blown, she reached behind her skirt to where a dagger was hidden, preparing to leap back. She had confidence in her ability to run away, and even if it turned into a fight, she was prepared to fight much more vehemently than that swordsman. She hadn't been trained in Zarmine for nothing.

Anyway, that was how Yuri felt at the moment.

——But, there was no time for her to retreat.

Together with a faintly piercing wind, she glimpsed the afterimage of a moving black shadow.

A collection of points of light drew a half-circle through the air, and a blueish, gleaming light entered Yuri's range of vision.

Before she realized it, she had become unable to move.

It seemed before he had even decided to reach towards his waist, in a feat of speed no eye could match, he was already holding his sword at her.

It was no ordinary longsword at that. It was giving off an aura of magical light….a magic sword.

From the blade itself a wavering blue-white light arose, and one could hear a humming sound as though of many insects flying around.

It looked incredibly sharp. At the very least it wasn't something she had any desire to have tested on her.

Yuri swallowed the lump in her throat.

"I, impossible… such speed…"

"Of course, after all I am a genius"

Rain said, pushing back his bangs with one hand. He really got on her nerves, but now was not the time for retorts.

On top of that the silent horse, Chris, looked at her as though she were an idiot, causing Yuri's stomach to churn.

Well, that's just coincidence.

"H, how….?"

"How did I know? Well you know, I'm just sorta sensitive to people's presence, so something like tailing could never work, and besides, your movement is nothing like an ordinary girls."

"Uuuu…"

"Hmph! It just means you're twenty years too young to try and deceive these eyes."

There was no limit to how much he wanted to brag. Yuri wanted more than anything to just punch him right there, but besides now not being the time for it, she was about to lose her life.

A spy was hated no matter what country one was in. If one were caught, it was execution. Though

more often a spy was cut down the moment they were discovered. In other words, this was an impossibly bad situation.

I'm in serious trouble! If I die here, then who's going to take care of my little sister! I've got to turn this around somehow, anyhow!

If I ask for help… … Ahhh! But what if, what if in return he wants me to do 'this' or 'that!' After all, this guy's got a weak head and seems like the lecherous type.

As Yuri was envisioning this, Rain questioned her lazily.

"So. What's your name?"

"…… It's Yuri."

"Yuri huh. I guess it's okay. It kind of dampens the mood though."

Mind your own business! She wanted to say, but Rain continued, asking her for her age.

It wouldn't mean anything even if she were to hide it now, so she responded with a "sixteen" while taking care to never move her gaze from the magic sword.

Rubbing his chin, Rain seemed oblivious to the fact that she was in a defenseless position.

You don't have to worry about me, I'm just as upset with how things turned out.

"Well, next time if you would just wear a shorter skirt. One that just nearly covers, you know."

Rain returned the magic sword back to it's sheath.

In a daze, Yuri watched as Rain began walking back towards his horse, humming.

"Chris, in just a bit we'll have some food, okay."

"…..wait a second…"

"I know, we should go to one of the inns outside town, huh Chris."

"…… Excuse me."

"Right! Your in agreement then. Alright, then you're treating till I drop!"

Yuri took in as much air as she could before she yelled with all her might,

"LISTEN UP YOOOU!! LISTEN TO WHAT I HAVE TO SAY, NOT THE HORSE!!!"

“Ohh!”

As though surprised, Rain turned around.

His black eyes were opened wide.

“You know, you shouldn’t just suddenly yell like that. After all, I like pretty voices.”

“What are you talking about, pretty voice! Y, you know, when someone is shaking, scared to death of being sliced to pieces, don’t be talking to your horse like nothing is wrong!!”

“When were you shaking? When? You were always just looking for a chance to run away. It’s fifty years too early for you to try and outrun me.”

Rain responded pridefully.

Ignoring the rest of your comment, you just increased the amount by thirty years from last time.

“Besides, you’ve seen my face up close so your business should be over, so why don’t you just hurry up and scat. Shoo, shoo.”

He waved his hand, as though chasing out a fly.

What, so you stopped just so I could see your face up close? Yuri brought her hands to her mouth to stifle another yell.

“Eh….it couldn’t be, you’re letting me go?”

“What would it matter if I’d killed you. All that would happen is another guy would come right? If so, then just cutting one down won’t change anything.”

“T, that’s true I guess…so you’re really letting me go.”

This guy, he’s a little better than I gave him credit for.

Yuri looked at Rain in a new light. Under any other circumstance she would be dead by now, and if not she would be taken as a slave, and in the end, killed anyway.

Up until then she hadn’t looked at his face once, but now, she saw beneath his jagged black bangs, a face with determination engraved on it. His black eyes especially left a lasting impression. They were sharp enough to belong to the wolves in the forests.

Yeah, he might just be handsome——it’s not the time for this!

Remembering something important, Yuri again grew dark.

It was great that her life was spared, but the mission she had been given to follow Rain was in shambles. *This alone is really bad.* Returning to Zarmine after failing her mission, she would definitely be punished. It was also possible her neck was on the line.

"What's wrong? You're making such a gloomy face again."

Rain asked, sitting atop his horse.

Instead of telling him to shove off, Yuri began telling him everything. After all she was indebted to him for sparing her life, and besides, she couldn't refrain herself from talking.

After listening to her story, Rain spoke.

"Then it's best for you to come with me, isn't it."

Surprised, Yuri lifted her gaze to meet his.

"You've got a mission after all, right? So there shouldn't be any problem then if you come with me."

"Eh?! Eh?! But my mission is information gathering. If we go together, then won't you be in trouble?"

Yuri asked, her eyes opened wide. Rain only laughed in response.

"I'm not going to be in trouble just by having you tag along. After all, I'm on my way back to my castle because I've just been put under house arrest."

"……Hah?"

"Like I said, house arrest. You know, the kind were I can't leave my castle. So I guess it's castle arrest, haha."

Rain told her, as though enjoying himself.

"Without preparing my soldiers I went by myself to the council and told everyone, "Hey, if we can't win even if we fight, why not just quit?" and the result of that is as I have just told you. So I'm on my way back to my castle, where I plan on taking a nice, long nap."

Watching Rain laugh himself hoarse, Yuri looked at him in disbelief. It wasn't a line any self-respecting honor-bound knight would ever be caught saying.

"D, departing and returning alone, I thought there was something up, but…"

Her head started to ache.

He was just an idiot after all.

“So, Yuri. What’ll you do? You gonna come with me?”

She heard his voice from afar.

It was hard for her to keep from telling him 'go on alone!' and in the end Yuri didn’t have the right to choose anyway.

“Uuuu! I’m going with you…”

Yuri responded, halfway to tears.

It must have been a coincidence, but Chris neighed, as though laughing at her.

Gradually, the scent of trees began mixing in with the chilling air.

From the metropolis to Astel, Rain’s province, it took three days by horse.

In other words, it was deep in the countryside. Or, as it was commonly referred to, the sticks.

Even so, out of all the province-holding generals, Rain was the only one who had no nobility in his lineage, and had risen from the level of an ordinary commoner. After all, King Douglas took the social hierarchy very seriously.

The long branches of southern cedars were all around, turning the area into a small forest. The region of Astel was either made up of either open plains, or forests like this.

Scattered throughout such terrain, were small towns and villages. It was countryside all around, and nothing more.

“We’ll be arriving at my castle soon, but do you got it? You’re a knight in training, so you can’t talk casually in front of me. Don’t even say a word.”

“That’s obvio… okay.”

Anybody watching would have seen Yuri struggling to voice her agreement.

Rain and Yuri agreed to say that their fathers knew each other. Which meant the setting was that Yuri was under Rain’s tutelage to become a knight.

Though the number of female knights were few, it wasn’t unheard of so the story itself wasn’t too strange. Actually, it was a fact that of Rain’s two Commanding Officers, one was female.

“What’s with that face? I’m saying this for your sake you know. And it’s okay to talk casually when

no one else is around, so I'd rather you were thankful about it."

"Well I am thankful……It's just I'm not good with all the formal talk."

"It can't be helped though, can it? I haven't heard you say you want to be separated from me after all."

"Ugh. Don't put it that way!"

"But it's true, right?"

Rain said, coolly.

Rain smiled complacently at Yuri as she fell into silence, a wrinkle creasing her brow. Then suddenly, his expression turned sullen.

"What happened?"

"Nothing, just remembered something unpleasant."

"So, why don't you just tell me already?"

"Xenoa, one of my Commanding Officers. When she finds out I'm under house arrest, I'm never gonna hear the end of it."

"Xenoa… …Isn't she the daughter of really powerful nobles, and one of the corners of the Five Houses?"

Yuri tilted her head to the side slightly. Rain was impressed that she was so well-versed, even if it was a strange thing to be knowledgeable about.

"Well, that is my job after all. Anyway, is she going to be that outspoken? The officer that is."

"Absolutely. Unbearably so as a matter of fact. She's a real beauty and has an excellent sense of style, but her rattling on really takes a toll on her charming points. I thought I'd really found something though when she first came to me about half a year back."

"You know, your way of wording things is, really odd……"

"It's fine, isn't it? More than that, we're about to come into view of the castle. Just after we get out of this part…look!"

In that moment they passed out of the forest, they were greeted by a spacious and grand scene. Yuri strained her eyes, following the direction Rain was pointing.

……But that extended finger froze suddenly.

Yuri's jaw dropped.

"What's all this about!"

"What's going on!"

Their two voices blended beautifully.

——☆——☆——☆——

Cortecreas Castle was Rain's castle and while it was small, a moat surrounded the high walls with defenses that would surely guarantee excellent protection.

Many spires jutted into the sky, the peaks of whitely painted towers.

A drawbridge led to the gate of the castle, and currently that bridge was down.

That was alright.

The problem was the plaza before the castle gate.

In that space there were two-thousand combined knights and foot soldiers, a mighty regiment.

Come war, and the troops would organize into ranks, marching out of this area.

The soldiers were packed into the open areas. From foot soldier to knight, it seemed the entire military strength of the castle was gathered here.

All of them were heavily clad in armor, and armed with spears and swords. It looked as though they were ready to march out for battle at any moment.

What's more, as though this amount were still insufficient, carts filled with weapons and provisions came one after another out from the castle.

The strange thing was, everyone was continuing their work in silence, seemingly exhausted in some way.

"You've been lying to me!"

Out of nowhere Yuri screamed in a shrill voice.

Rain turned his head around jerkily, as though his neck were a badly rusted metal joint.

"Just what's that!? They're preparing to sortie! All you've said about being under house arrest has been a lie! Saying whatever you wanted at the start, you were planning on locking me away

somewhere and then doing whatever you wanted!"

"Cripes you're noisy! Don't go making up your own erotic fantasies!"

Before she could finish, Rain interrupted.

"Who would do something that bothersome just to push you down!? Cool your head, idiot!! I've got no idea what's going on same as you! I'm in the middle of figuring it out myself! Got it!?"

Yuri responded by raising her voice and shouting all the louder. It would seem she hadn't understood.

Unable to take it anymore, Rain covered his ears with both hands, and used his feet to get Chris to move forward.

Right now he needed to find out what the reason for all this was.

Proceeding quickly into the plaza, a man clanking in his armor, most likely recognizing Rain came towards him from the middle of the group.

Shortly trimmed blond hair and blue eyes…… But those eyes were different from a nobles in that the white part of the eye was in fact, white. His face was well groomed, but a youthfulness emanated from his expression, giving off an aura of unreliability.

He was one of Rain's officers, Leni. His real name was actually Lelbyni, but it was too troublesome for Rain to say, so he had shortened it to Leni. Each of his two officers were captains of a thousand.

This Leni, even though the cold season was about to start, wiped sweat from his brow as he ran towards Rain. His eyes darting around everywhere was especially suspicious.

"Hey, Leni! What's going on? It's not Zarmine is it? They haven't come this far already, have they? Hey!"

Rain asked hurriedly, but Leni avoided meeting Rain's gaze, and at length began making excuses.

"I told her, I did. To stop. And that this was moving too fast…"

"…… Hah? What are you saying, Leni?"

"N, no. What I mean is, I really tried to stop her. Something like this shouldn't be started until after the General gets back, I said."

Rain was lost.

Frustrated, he dismounted from Chris and grabbed Leni by both his shoulders, shaking him

violently.

“Listen! Tell me in a way I can understand!”

“No! What I mean is, if you could just know that I’m not the one at fault……Ah!”

He was stumbling over his words when he noticed Yuri riding up, and his attention flew out to her.

“General! Who is that very pretty girl with you?”

“Listen, won’t you! My question comes first.”

“Oh my. Pretty? I’m really not so……”

Yuri put her hands to her cheeks, intentionally acting cute and ignoring Rain. It seemed the misunderstanding had been cleared and her bad mood was taken care of.

“Well, I am here to train under Rain by my father’s introduction. My name is Yuri. Nice to meet you~.”

In his youthful way, Rain interrupted Yuri, who had been speaking in an enchanting tone, lavished with charm.

“Hey, hey! Don’t wave your hand around, your hand! I mean, Leni! Don’t you be drawn in either! Hurry up and explain the situation to me, now!”

But Leni didn’t live up to Rain’s expectations. Fawning over the smiling Yuri, he was completely distracted. Deciding to look for someone else, Rain turned his gaze to the open courtyard just in time to see a group of soldiers split in two, and something unsteady on its feet come staggering towards him.

To describe it simply, it was a heap of armor.

It was a silver-white glinting heavy equipment armor, and completely covered from head to feet. But perhaps because whoever wore it had little physical strength, or because they weren’t used to using heavy armor, their feet were quite unstable. If one ever went to battle in that state, it would only serve as ample target practice for the enemy.

He wanted to know who the idiot was, but unfortunately the face was covered by the helmet’s face guard.

The riddle of a knight staggered its way over, constantly fixing its bearing, slowly approaching Rain. It was quite ghastly to watch.

“Leni, who is that idiot?”

“Eh? Well, that is… uhm.”

“Never mind. Just wait a moment. I don’t think I want to know. I don’t want to hear who it is wearing that armor!”

As though by divine inspiration, Rain who had suddenly realized who it was under the armor, shook his head in negation. Even though he knew shaking his head wouldn’t make any difference.

As expected, Leni’s next words were spoken in pity.

“If that is your request, then I shall not push the information on you. But no matter, as you’re about to know soon enough.”

“Uuhh. I know…”

Letting out a heavy sigh, the one staggering as though drunk approached Rain and the others, finally coming to stand before him with heaving shoulders.

Like a late autumn bug, the voice that spoke next had a very fine tone.

“Haah Haah… General… Welcome, back… I have, been… eagerly, awaiting… your return.”

“It must be hard to breath, take your helmet off, your helmet! So irritating.”

Interrupting the long speech, the person before him let out a gasp as they, clanking, took off their helmet.

Blond hair that was in waves, and blue eyes which were the marks of nobility appeared out from within the helmet.

She was an exceptional beauty that could widen anyone’s eyes.

“Haa Haa… … For now, congratulations on your return, General.”

“Yeah. You haven’t changed, Xenoa.”

Rain looked down the other of his adjutants, clearly upset.

“So, has your breathing gone back to normal?”

“Yes, sir. Something of this caliber is nothing I can’t handle.”

“Ah, I see… well that’s good then.”

“There is no use for your concern. By the way, General.”

Xenoa looked stiffly at Yuri, standing behind Rain.

“And who would this be?”

“Eh, Ahh….Her name’s Yuri. I was asked by her father to put her in my care, so from today she’s going to be learning what it takes to be a knight.”

After lightly making the introductions, he added that their fathers both knew each other.

Only Leni happily nodded his head, while Xenoa maintained her stiff expression.

“Is that how it is…… If your name is Yuri, then mine is Xenoa Amelia Easterheart. My middle name, Amelia, is not my mother’s, it’s my childhood name. When you address me, ‘Commanding Officer’ will do.”

Xenoa who’s name was as long as you’d expect from any noble, was even in Rain’s eyes, speaking in a disdainful tone.

Yuri felt the same way, so she responded with ‘pleased to meet you’ in a very unfriendly manner. It seemed almost as though small fireworks were exploding between the two girls’ eyes.

“Hey now, don’t start off with so much tension. But that aside, Xenoa could you tell me what’s going on here?”

“Hm? Explain… you say?”

“You’re really looking at me as though you don’t understand… I’m talking about this state where it looks like we’re ready to head off to battle at any moment, explain that!”

Upset, Rain waved his arm to indicate the field packed with soldiers.

Tilting her head to one side, Xenoa let out a faint ‘oh, that’s what you meant,’ followed up with her puffing out her chest in pride.

“Naturally, since we would be moving out the moment the General returned, I had us all get prepared to move out.”

Rain looked silently at the beautiful face of Xenoa, feeling ever so pleased with herself.

And then just one sentence.

“Are you really that idiotic.”

“——Wh, what!?”

“Don’t ‘wh, what!’ me. Who said you could go ahead and do as you like! It’s fine not doing

anything you don't need to!"

Rain continued his lecture to the taken aback Xenoa.

"Besides, what are you going to do after you've gathered all the castle's military power into one place. You at least need a regiment to keep watch over the castle don't you? Do you not understand at least that!?"

"B, but…"

"Don't 'b, but' me! Sent the groups back into the castle this instant!"

"Well, just a moment, General."

Leni held up his two hands as though to keep Rain from advancing on Xenoa. That's when Rain turned to him.

"…… Leni. I'll be docking half your pay next month for negligence of supervision."

"Wha! That's too cruel! I honestly tried to stop her!"

Leni raised his voice almost to tears.

As though done with the matter, Rain proceed to walk towards the castle.

"Well, I suppose I'll let it go then. In return, get me in contact with Günter as quickly as you can. I have something I need to talk to him about."

"I, I will contact him at once."

Leni removed his hand from over his heart.

Yuri followed after Chris and Rain, while Leni turned around and headed off in a different direction.

For a moment it seemed the matter was at a rest.

But for some reason things just didn't work out that easily.

"Please wait a moment!"

Xenoa said in a raised voice.

"What is it? I want to hurry up and sleep in my room already."

"I will admit I went overboard."

Rain turned to face her, yet without paying attention to his comment, Xenoa continued.

“We will be moving out against Zarmine anyway are we not? In that case it would be ridiculous to release the soldiers right now.”

Ugh, it’s here.

Rain shook his head.

He couldn’t keep quiet about the fact of his house arrest, especially as Xenoa was one of his adjutants. Besides, even if he didn’t say anything it would be found out soon enough.

It couldn’t be helped, so Rain explained it as light heartedly as he could. He had known Leni for a long time so there wasn’t much concern there, the problem was with Xenoa.

“……Ah~, well you see. It sorta seems like after I voiced my disagreement with the war, His Majesty got pretty upset. And, well… I’m under house arrest, haha. Oh well… Haha!”

Explaining the situation the easiest way he could, Rain scratched the back of his head with a fake smile on his face.

Xenoa glared back at Rain with an expression that made it seem as though she were wearing a death-mask.

“….What did you say?”

The tone of her voice was eerily low.

“I’ve already said it. House Arrest. House, Arrest. Like where I stay in my castle and reflect on what I did. Well, that’s how it is so I’ll be going to my room now.”

Sensing he was in dangerous territory from Xenoa’s expression, Rain turned himself around. He was running away when, not haven gone but a few steps, when suddenly a blood chilling cry erupted from behind him.

There was no need to think about who it could be. It was Xenoa.

Again turning on the spot, Xenoa had both her hands clasped about her head, and was screaming, her body shaking uncontrollably. It was a voice that would make one think she had gone mad.

“Higyaaaaaaaaaaa——!” The sound filled the surroundings.

“J, just a minute there…”

Even Rain didn’t escape shock. It was a really ghastly scene.

Yuri and Leni, who had still been close by, came up next to each other.

“General, don’t you think that’s more forceful that usual?”

“Eh, does she always shout like that, Commander Leni?”

“Well sort of. But normally it’s a little more bearable.”

“How should I put it… she’s quite the individual.”

‘You said it,’ Leni seemed to say, watching Rain.

“W, what! I did nothing wrong!”

The moment Rain made his pathetic excuse, the screaming stopped.

Everyone gulped down their saliva, watching Xenoa attentively.

Xenoa sat down on the ground peacefully.

Not long after a ghastly laugh began seeping out her mouth. Continuing to laugh, she for some unknown reason began taking armor off of her body piece by piece. In other words, she was removing her armor.

“Th, this seems pretty dangerous, General…! Wouldn’t it be best if you just apologized already…?”

Leni gulped.

Yuri was instead observing Xenoa in amusement.

“Oh boy. This time is really bad. Hey, Leni why don’t you go and apologize for me.”

“You jest! I don’t have courage enough for that.”

“Yeah… then Yuri, you go.”

“Stup…! I don’t wanna either…! I mean, I don’t want to! After all, in my dead grandmother’s will it says for me not to stick my head into any dangerous situations!”

“Why you! What’s with that ‘my grandmother’s will’ garbage! You should think a little more before you speak!”

As Leni gazed intermittently at Xenoa,
“General, you yourself are always telling me there is nothing you’re scared of. If that is so, then

this is your time to shine, sir."

"Even if I'm not afraid of anything, that doesn't mean I'm good at handling certain things. For one, a nagging woman. For another a woman who can't do housework. Finally, a woman who laughs while taking off her armor all of a sudden!"

"……I guess it doesn't matter, but those all involve women, General."

"That's why you should just go already!"

As Rain and Leni fought over who would be the one to approach her, Xenoa continued to remove her armor piece after piece. At long last every piece had been removed, and she suddenly stopped laughing.

Taking a sword, she slowly stood up.

Pulling on the handle, she pulled from its sheath, a longsword. There was a stirring among the subordinates watching attentively, and an audible gulping sound.

"Oohh! The Commanding Officer has snapped!"

"W, whoa!!"

Leni stiffened his body.

"General, this is really bad!!"

Backing away, Leni's voice shook as he continued his retreat.

"I, I've got nothing to do with this, isn't that right, Xenoa?"

"Leni, why you……"

What a cold hearted subordinate. 'Don't you think so too?' Rain was about to say as he looked to his side, only to find Yuri had already made her dash for safety some distance away. From a place a good distance away, she watched with excitement in her eyes.

"All I have around me is people like this, huh……"

As he sighed, Xenoa approached, sword in hand. The look in her eyes was deadly.

"General……"

"W, what?"

I am completely disgusted with you. As a Leading General, for you to have not only been put under

house arrest, but for it to have come because you voiced disagreement with the war!"

"No, it's just I have my own plan is all."

"Only, the embarrassment of the General is also the embarrassment of the Commanding Officer."

She wasn't listening at all.

"Let us bravely take responsibility together."

No matter how you looked at it she was dead serious.

Well I guess it is my fault……man what a bind. Even so though, I can't afford to die.

Rain finally came to his decision after watching the approaching Xenoa, sword drawn. He really just wanted to run away, but his pride wouldn't allow it.

For now, he decided to try and sooth her with a friendly attitude.

"Well let's just calm down for a moment, Xenoa. I'll just go ahead and say it, but the real fight with Zarmine will start soon. In preparation for that new battle, you must quiet your fiery fighting spirit and…..you aren't listening to a thing I'm saying!"

"Your readiness!"

With a shriek, Xenoa swung her blade down with all the strength she could gather, very nearly grazing Rain's body.

With a clang the tip of her sword was plunged into earth.

"Th, that was dangerous, seriously! What would you have done had that hit! This isn't a joke!"

"General……"

With eyes wide, Xenoa once again raised her sword above her head.

"Along the road to Hades, I apologize for the impoliteness today. Bravely with me, come!"

"Uugh! You're not listening. And it's not 'come' anything!"

Xenoa was completely engrossed in her own world. It was even dubious as to whether or not she was actually listening.

There was no helping it.

Rain, as though his hand had been forced, reached his hand to the hilt of his sword.

“This time, your readiness!”

“Aahh, geez! Guess I can’t avoid this!”

Xenoa swung down for a second time.

At that moment–

The magic sword drew a circle of blue light through the air at the speed of lightning, easily deflecting Xenoa’s attack.

Silver sparks emanating from her blade which was now spinning away, it drove itself deep into the earth upon landing impossibly far away.

“Ah!”

Xenoa watched as it happened.

“Hmph.”

Meaninglessly tossing his hair, Rain re-sheathed his sword.

“Yesterday, today, there’s no way an amateur who just started could ever cut a genius such as myself!…… Hey, what’s wrong? You’re not feigning ignorance now are you?”

Her mouth half open and looking as though ready to burst into tears at any moment, Xenoa stood up. It looked like her spirit had left her.

“Hello? Anybody there? You’re sane, right?”

“….ity, please.”

“Wha? You’ll have to speak up.”

Unable to understand what she had said, Rain moved in closer, giving her his ear when Xenoa suddenly grabbed Rain by his shirt.

“Take responsibility, please.”

“Wah! Hey! Let go, calm down!”

“This was supposed to be my first time on a campaign, and even so, you had to go and get put under house arrest!!!”

Xenoa raised her voice, practically screaming into his ear.

Even as Xenoa shook him by the shoulders, Rain could swear he heard Yuri laughing heavily somewhere far away.

Chapter 2: Ralphus's Battle

The drizzle that had been falling since midnight finally lifted around noon. It was a great relief. After all, with winter around the corner, you didn't want the water freezing over.

Ralphus looked back at his men, shaking his head softly.

Since they were marching it wasn't too strange, but it seemed nobody was talking. Even so, it just felt too quiet.

It was almost as though his men riding along the road were being pressed in by uncertainty for what lay ahead.

It wasn't strange...after all, the country they were going to face was Zarmine after all. Not many people would be excited about going off to a battle where the chances of winning were slim to none. No matter how seasoned a fighter, everybody wished to return alive from the battlefield. Nobody in their right mind would wish for anything else.

Ralphus felt the weight of responsibility in caring for the lives of his men weigh down on his chest.

The land they were passing through now was once Lunan, wiped out half a year previously by Zarmine. They were passing through a scarcely traveled forest, along a narrow road.

Ralphus had already passed the border several days earlier on the King's order, but currently he was moving towards the battlefield with only his unit.

The reason was simple. He had been left behind by the King.

This morning, he had awoken to find, to his great displeasure, that King Douglas and the other Generals had long since proceeded on.

It seemed that the King harbored a dislike for him after all. Most likely it was due to him covering for Rain before.

He had thought it was strange to have been sent in such a round about direction, but he never would have guessed that once in the enemies' land they would have been left behind.

Ralphus still did not regret his earlier actions, but the King's absence of generosity went beyond hopeless to verge on despair.

It was the nerve of the thing that got him upset the most. After all, it would only serve to harm their chances if a battle were to break out suddenly.

...I've got to stop worrying about it. It's not something dwelling on it is going to change. It'll be alright if I can just give it my best.

Telling himself so, Ralphus raised his voice to address his men.

They needed to catch up with the King as quickly as possible, but taking a break was also a necessity.

"Attention! All units, we will take a short rest before moving out! You have permission to eat!" As though a bit of life had been restored to his men, a moderately energetic response met his ears. The men dismounted from their horses, relieved for the moment.

Ralphus looked out over his men, observing, when he heard a shout from behind.

"Lord General! What are you doing!? When it's time to rest, don't be so stiff!" A man large both in stature and size rode up beside him.

He had a thick beard, and a face weathered with his experience in the mountains. His voice was rough, and his thick black hair was shaggy and unkempt.

His name was Gwen, and he had been Ralphus's aide since the first time he had gone to the battlefield when he was fifteen. He was halfway through his twenties.

"It's alright, I have to..."

"Come on, let's rest over there. I'll go with you!"

"--Alright, Gwen"

Giving a strained smile, Ralphus dismounted.

Gwen had a nice demeanor, but when he wanted to do something, it was hard for him to back down. Going along with him was for the best.

Also, for some reason Gwen still referred to Ralphus as Lord General, and had called him such for over ten years now. To be precise, there are times when he uses 'General,' but then he'll fall back into his habit of saying 'Lord General.' Ralphus had long since stopped caring, and so didn't mind being called 'Lord General' as much anymore.

After all, Gwen wasn't doing so in a disrespectful manner.

They walked away from the rest of the men, and sat down with their backs to a tree.

"Geez. The ground is damp. My butt's gonna get wet."

Gwen scrunched up his face.

"If you can feel it, then it's proof you're alive."
Ralphus let slip his current thoughts. Thinking he had said something foreboding, Gwen

responded.

"Lord General, you think this time is that dangerous? I guess it can't be helped considering the enemy is Zarmine after all..."

"No no no."

Ralphus tried to downplay it, but he paused, mulling it over. There was no reason to hide it from Gwen

"I'm afraid so. I can't deny that Zarmine is impossibly strong."

"I gotta agree with ya there. I've heard we've got about fifteen-thousand strong, but they've got forty to fifty-thousand just in their expedition force, right?"

"Yeah, according to the official reports that's how things stand. The commander...I believe his name was General Garblake "

The aide was something like Luminas.

Ralphus calmly recalled the two names. Garblake was a General who had honed his battle skills through countless battles, while Luminas relied more on strategy and brains to win his battles. Is what the rumors stated. After all, this would be the first time Zarmine and Sunkwoll would be facing off against each other, so not much information was available.

Even so, the absolute might of Zarmine was known. At the very least, they were two that should not be underestimated.

"Well, if there is such a difference in skill then there's no helpin' it. Besides that, there was something else I'm wonderin' about."

Gwen gazed fixedly at Ralphus. For some reason he frowned deeply.

"It's not like you, taking such a round about way to say something. What's upsetting you?"

Ralphus asked gently. Gwen blurted out,

"Obvious! It's about Lord General Rain!"

"About Rain?"

"Yeah! Isn't he a close friend of yours, Lord General? If so, then I can't accept him just runnin' away like he is this time. When things are this bad, he's only thinkin' of himself... Don't it seem like he just went an' abandoned you Lord General!?"

"Rain, huh... Wonder what he's up to right about now."

Ralphus smiled, remembering the face of his close friend back in Sunkwoll. He must have already reached his castle over ten days ago, so probably he was being pestered by that golden haired beauty Xenoia right about now.

He had already sent off the letter Princess Shelfa had requested of him, and that had probably arrived as well by now.

"What are you laughin' about!? I'm really upset here!"

"Getting angry at me won't solve anything."

"That's true but...ahh! Lord General you're too nice fer your own good! I just don' get you!

As though he'd grown more aggravated from talking, Gwen's veins were pulsing in his face, and it a swift movement he drew close to Ralphus.

Gwen's face looked like that of a child crying at night, Ralphus thought apologetically. From the start, his face was one to show a lot of expressions though.

Not understanding Ralphus's feelings, Gwen sat back in discontent.

"Ya know, no matter what I say, I do admit that guys strong, at least a little. He has helped you out, Lord General, after all. It's just this time, even if he didn't care about anyone else, I thought he'd come an' at least help you, Lord General. Geez, what a mes'!"

"Even if you say that... I don't feel as though I've been betrayed by Rain."

"What else could there be....if this isn't betrayal, then what other explanation could 'der be?"

Ralphus squared his shoulders, but could offer no response.

He knew himself that Rain wasn't that kind of person. It's just, it was hard to explain it to someone else. Something he believed in the depths of his heart, just wasn't something he could express in words.

Even Gwen had been helped out by Rain a time or two before, so at the very least he should have a little more faith in him.

Well, this time Rain had acted a little different from usual..
Wait a moment...

Thinking that far, Ralphus got caught on one thought.

Why would, after risking a lot of danger in opposing the war, he have been satisfied to just quietly accept being placed under house arrest... If he was serious about running away, there were

countless other ways to do it. Then isn't there some other motive behind his actions? Another motive I haven't considered yet...

Contemplating to this extent, he thought of something as though just received some kind of divine revelation.

"I see! That guy...!"

Gwen's eyes opened wide at Ralphus's exclamation, and he began to explain.

"I've got it. I know now why Rain wanted to be put under house arrest."

"...What are you gettin' at?"

"In other words, it's like this. How would things be now, if Rain had marched out with us?"

"That's easy. He'd be out here fighting with us right about now."

"No no no, that's not the point."

Ralphus shook his head.

"If we go out to battle the way things are now, he'd just die with us. In that case, he wouldn't be able to fulfill his objective."

"Just a minute, Lord General...this ain't the place for thos' words."

It seemed even Gwen cared about his surroundings. Then again, Ralphus had just said something that anybody listening could mistake for a declaration of hopelessness.

"It's not like Lord General So, what is this objective?"

"That's obvious, isn't it. To save us."

Ralphus said with full certainty.

"Had he followed orders and marched out to war with us, no matter how strong he may be, he wouldn't be able to move as he wants. Under the orders of His Majesty, in the end only death would be waiting. That's why he got himself put under house arrest on purpose. If he did that, then he could move freely, and find a way to save all of us. That's the real truth here."

Ralphus nodded, as though confirming his own words.

Only, out of those he would save, most likely His Majesty wasn't included.

Gwen could only stare dumbstruck at Ralphus after listening to his response. It was the face a

greedy moneylender would make upon spotting a poor customer.

"……Well, if that's the way thin's are, then I really wan' him to work hard. After all he's always goin' on about how much of a genius he is."

Gwen said sarcastically, turning his gaze to his companions. He didn't seem to believe even an inch of that explanation.

"But he most definitely has something up his sleeve. But you really seem to be doubting him,

Gwen Just as he says, that guy really is a genius For some reason, Rain doesn't seem to believe his own words though..."

"D, don't joke about something like that!"

Gwen's eyes widened in shock.

"He's someone who calls himself a genius every every ten steps you know?"

"Gwen, you're exaggerating. Well, not that far off the mark, and the gist of what your saying isn't wrong. It's just, what he says and how he feels is a little different, is all I think."

"He hasn't told you anythin' specific, has he?"

To Gwen who asked curiously, Ralphus could return give a slightly lonely smile.

"Of course not. He's not someone who let's out what he's feeling that easily. This is just how I see it."

He was unable to explain any further to Gwen who was looking at him with an unsatisfied expression. Noticing another of his aides approaching, Ralphus stood to meet him.

"What's happened, Nigel?"

Nigel was an aide with a lot of experience on the battlefield, but just from looking at him you wouldn't get the impression of a warrior.

His lustrous black hair which must have been washed only this morning shimmered in the sunlight, as he looked at Ralphus with his large girlish eyes.

His face which resembled a beautiful young girl was the very picture of calm and composed.

There was almost no chance he had come just for idle chatter, so something must have happened that he had come to report about. Ralphus had an odd premonition.

"Reporting, General."

Nigel saluted magnificently, stating his business in a manner that suggested he was talking about the weather.

"The scouts have yet to return, though it is past the scheduled time."

Ralphus met Gwen’s gaze.

When proceeding in unknown territory, he always sent out many scouts. The fact that none of them had returned, was very forbidding indeed.

"Oi! You can't mean not a single one has returned!?"

Nigel nodded silently.

Nigel kept his unconcerned composure, but this was definitely not something that could be dismissed. Under most circumstances if a scout doesn't return, it can be assumed they were killed by the enemy.

Obviously in this case the enemy was none other than Zarmine.

It would seem as though their enemy had finally caught on to their movements.

It was the only explanation, Ralphus thought, biting his lower lip. Occupying enemy territory for this many days, it wasn't strange that their presence had been made known by now. There was no point saying it now, but from the start this strategy had been a bust.

"……Lord General, we're in a heap of trouble, ain't we..."

"Yeah. We've been planning a surprise attack, but in the end it is us who are on the receiving end... I'm worried about His Majesty. We're going after His Majesty!"

While he was still shouting--

From far off the faint sounds of a multitude of people bellowing could be heard.

Accompanying the shouts was the distinct sound of metal on metal.

"Che! It seems we're already too late!"

Ralphus shouted, clanking in his armor as he started to run. Shortly behind, the two aides followed.

The three of them, knowing what the source of the sound was, moved quickly through the soldiers to their mounts. In a loud voice, Ralphus addressed his men.

"Listen up! Bad news, but it seems the enemy is at hand! Most likely this sound comes from the start of a battle between our King and the enemy force. We must join the fight swiftly!"

As though their previous conversations had been stopped in their throats, the men all listened intently to Ralphus. All eyes and ears were on him.

After ensuring that his words were heard by all, especially the unit leaders, in a loud voice he gave the order.

"Alright! All units in formation, and move quickly into battle formation! When we reach the battlefield, line up and wait for my command. Everyone, quickly!"

Following Ralphus's command, the soldiers who had just been perfectly still, all moved out with a single objective. Movement was calm and without faltering.

Even with all the hard expressions on their faces, Ralphus, impressed, spoke to Gwen

"Even though war is just around the corner, they're all so calm. As expected of a soldier."

"No, that ain't it. It's because the one givin' the orders is you, Lord General."

"--? I don't understand."

Gwen shrugged, shaking his head at Ralphus, before pointing directly ahead.

"It's fine if you don' get it. Let's get goin'! If would be crazy for the Lord General to arrive later than the rest."

"Y, yeah. "You're right!"

Light spurring his horse forward, he moved into a gallop.

He prayed that they wouldn't arrive too late.

He and his men moved at this pace for a while. The extent of the bellowing and screams they could hear intensified as they drew nearer.

As Ralphus was hurrying down the road, he spotted a group of soldiers in armor running his way.

One of them was a centurion he recognized, so these weren't enemies. All of them had lost their mounts, and so were running on foot. From he fact that he could see several injured mixed in, he concluded they were in retreat.

Ralphus halted his horse, and raised his voice.

"Stop there! What are you doing? What has happened on the front?"

"……Aahh!"

The men's faces seemed to gain strength, and they looked relieved upon seeing him.

Gwen made a 'hmph' through his nose before speaking.

"Whoa whoa, you're already deserting? Seriously!?"

"W, we're...!"

The centurion opened his mouth in opposition, but lost his nerve after looking into Ralphus's eyes.

"Th, there was no helping it! W, we were betrayed by one of our own!"

"Betrayed?"

Ralphus faced showed his anger at this news.

The centurion swallowed hard.

"Th, that's right. As soon as we thought we had come into sight of the enemy, General Ganoa's and General Gilles's units turned on His Majesty's unit...H, His Majesty had his head..."

Seeing the color drain from Ralphus's face, the man started shaking and couldn't continue.

Ralphus forcibly ground his teeth, before asking quietly.

"In other words...His Majesty has died."

"Y, yes!"

The mens' eyes met Ralphus's, and as though guilty of some great crime, they shook in fear.

"……Ganoa or Gilles. Which one killed His Majesty."

"I, I don't know. The two of them, it was as though they were competing over it."

Ralphus grasped the situation.

In other words, when it had happened he didn't know, but they had accepted an offer from Zarmine. And so, knowing the plan of attack, they had made their final decision.

As soon as the Zarmine soldiers had appeared, they had attacked and killed King Douglas. After all,

there was no better present when trying to buy your safety than the head of a King.

"AAHHHHHH! DIRTY SHITS!"

Gwen who had been silent until that moment, suddenly let out a tremendous howl. Nigel sat silently upon his horse, his arms crossed, seemingly lost in thought.

".....Have to hurry."

Paying no more heed to the men, Ralphus urged his horse forward.

What filled his heart now, was the weight of regret.

If I had only been more aware, I could have done something more to save His Majesty...Or else have I just always been making the wrong choices to end up here?

Perhaps it was no use talking about it now, but even so he felt responsible.

"That's the end of the forest!"

Gwen said in a rather wary tone. Ralphus spurred his horse on faster, breaking out into the bright sunlight.

As his field of vision widened, he could see a dark multitude across the field.

The standard armor of Zarmine was jet black, and really stood out. It was as though the ground itself was a giant mass of pitch black movement.

But at the moment only a fraction of the mass was still continuing to fight, and it wouldn't be far off to declare the remaining Sunkwoll army done for. The difference in numbers was just too great, and the fatalities were rapidly increasing, or else they were deserting.

Seemingly sucked into the nearly forty-thousand strong enemies, it was clear that Sunkwoll's defeat was imminent.

The herd of silver armor was being pushed back, it's numbers continuously dwindling.

From what Ralphus could see, it also seemed that the five-thousand that had made up the King's regiment was already completely eliminated, and the one's fighting now were the remaining Generals and some men that had rallied around them. Even so, the remaining were no more than several thousand strong.

As the rest of his unit arrived behind him, his men gazed out at the scene before them.

"Lord General...this is already..."

Gwen said, softly.

Ralphus slowly shifted his gaze across the battlefield. He understood what Gwen was trying to say. There was no point in joining the fight now. The King they were to protect had already fallen, and the remaining men were already starting to retreat.

Only, there was no way Zarmine would just let them retreat at this point. If they had wanted to, it would already have come to pass.

"I know, Gwen"

Calm enough to surprise himself, Ralphus turned to his men and spoke.

"Regrettably, this battle is already decided. I see no reason for us to join the fight at this stage."

Silently, the men took in what Ralphus was saying.

"As fast as your mounts will carry you, run back to your homes in Sunkwoll! There is no longer any reason for you to heed my commands. Everyone, return to your country!"

Ralphus raised his hand in salute.

Nobody saluted in return. The men who would always move immediately upon receiving a command...not one of them moved.

Ralphus, agitated, was about to repeat his order when Nigel silently moved forward.

"General, what will you do?"
He asked, his voice full of meaning.

"Me? I will--"

After only a moment, Ralphus gave up on trying to make an excuse.

They aren't people he could easily deceive anyway.

"I have decided this will be the place where I die. You need not worry about me, so the rest of you should hurry and return home."

Nigel said nothing, and only continued to stare at Ralphus.

"What is it, Nigel"

"I can't say. After all you will just tell me to stop. Besides, I understand how you feel."

"That response, it's obvious what your planning! Just be quiet and follow my order!"

Ralphus blurted out, forgetting himself for a moment.

Just then, a beat-red faced Gwen slapped Nigel on his back.

In a good mood, moved by Nigel's words, Gwen continued to pound vigorously on Nigel's back, causing him to go into a coughing fit.

"So moving! That's what a real man is! I thought you were always so gloomy, but that you were such a man, I never knew!"

"Geez. But the part about you having no charm, that's the same as always."

Gwen laughed deeply, in a manner that caused his throat to vibrate wildly.

"Now just hold on one second. This isn't a time to be laughing, Gwen Same goes for you, Nigel I'm begging you, please go back to our homeland. If you leave now, there should still be time."

"Can't we just drop it already, General. The guys that don't want to die are already running away, and the ones following the same fate as the Lord General, won't listen no matter what you say."

Gwen said cheerfully, showing off the great battleaxe strapped to his back.

You're just talking about yourself... Ralphus let out a sigh.

Only, it wasn't just Gwen

Starting with Nigel, not one man moved from his place.

"Everyone...forgive me...."

"What are you goin' on about. Let's get down to business already. Where should we start? It's an all-you-can-have buffet of enemies to choose from."

"Let's see."

Ralphus recovered his composure, and pointed to the depths of the great army to where their previous allies stood.

"If we're going to die anyway, we might as well have some revenge on the betrayers."

Gilles, who had sold out Sunkwoll, was uncharacteristically standing at the front lines, even though the battle was still in progress.

Of course there was a reason.

Because the head of King Douglas had already been taken by Ganoa, he need to prove his loyalty to Zarmine by taking as many heads as he could.

His change of sides still only just a faint promise, things had gone full circle for him.

Then again, he may be at the front lines, but everyone who had once counted him an ally, were in the process of fleeing.

At he very least, that is what Giles was thinking.

That idiot Ganoa. Just because he had taken the King's head, he had already long since fled to the back lines. Even though it was a chance for him to gain even greater achievement.

His large body swaying with the movement of his horse, Giles was at that moment contemplating his next action.

According to his agreement with Zarmine, he had been promised territory that was several times the size of the land he had now. With that much land, he could even build a new castle.

He had always been thinking his castle was too small.

He would need a lot more side rooms too. Then he'd order his men to find him some beautiful girls.

Giles had the image of the beautiful Princess Shelfa float into his mind. Might he make that virgin girl his... Well, it wasn't impossible. She was no longer that flower so far out of his reach.

Grinning broadly while imagining having his way with the willowy princess, one of his aides approached him on horseback. His face was pale.

"General! T, trouble! E, enemies are attacking!"

"Enemies? What are you daydreaming. They've all been almost completely wiped out already!"

"It's not them, the enemy is different!"

His aide's face was filled with fear as he stood before Giles.

"It's G, general Ralphus's unit, sir....that unit is charging straight for us! They'll be here any moment!"

"WHAT!?"

Giles wildly looked towards the front.

There was something like a cloud of dust rising, and the bellowing of a small group charging this way. That standard was unmistakeably Ralphus's.

"N, no way..."

Gilles's large body shook violently, as he let out a whimper.

It's not that he had failed to see Ralphus arrive. It's just, he never thought Ralphus would join in the skirmish.

When the battle was determined, and all that remained was to eliminate the remaining Sunkwoll forces, be Ralphus or anyone else, there was no way they would charge into the fight. Even if it was to show their allegiance to Sunkwoll, this was the time to retreat and rethink a new strategy.

——It was a huge miscalculation for Giles, who had lived his life from the viewpoint of a mercenary.

Ralphus's standards were something he couldn't begin to comprehend.

"What's your order, General!?"

The aide had asked, but it was Giles who really wanted to know the answer.

"F, for now let's set up a defense! The Zarmine army should come to help shortly!"

Just as he barked the order, the first wave hit.

Just like a sharp blade, the enemy force sliced into Gilles's ranks.

Gilles's men were not prepared for such a frontal assault.

Apart from knowing they had betrayed their allies, there was an unshakeable fear of Ralphus himself. After all, Ralphus's bravery and feats on the battlefield were highly renown throughout Sunkwoll.

Giles was no exception. He was a man with a high level of self-confidence, but even so he had never once thought he could defeat Ralphus.

In the next moment, the unit which Ralphus was heading crashed into the front lines of Gilles's men. Giles swallowed hard.

What forcefulness.....there's no way we can win this one. Zarmine! Why haven't you come to help yet!

About ready to cry, Giles looked back to see the Zarmine forces withdrawing, even though their

distance wasn't all that far apart. They didn't move one foot from their location.

They looked on with a cold gaze that would cause anyone to become enraged.

"Damn it! What's going on!?"

Looking around for his aide, Giles realized that he had disappeared without him realizing.

Abandoned! It wasn't just him. Giles watched his other commanding officers turn their horses back and flee.

From the start his men weren't ones to follow out of respect, and when the situation turned grim, they all fled, leaving him behind.

"A, ah....."

Falling deeper into fear, Giles pulled back on the rains hard.

His mount, not used to such treatment, bucked, tossing its rider off.

"Ahhh!"

Giles landed hard on the ground, shouting in pain at the sudden impact to his hip.

Unfortunately all the others around him had already disappeared, and Ralphus saw it all.

Their eyes met, as though a line had been drawn between them.

"Giles! Don't move!"

Usually very subdued in speech, Ralphus let out a shout like lightning.

"Hiyaaa!"

Letting out a scream that would cause anyone's soul to jump out of one's body, Giles squirmed along the ground in an attempt to move away, but his horse had long since disappeared

"I, is there nobody!?"

There was no response, and by the time he regained his feet, Ralphus was standing silently before him.

Behind him stood two aides, and they watched him just as fiercely.

"A, ah....."

Giles swallowed what he was about to say.

Without breaking their gaze, Ralphus asked quietly.

"The one who raised his hand against His Majesty, was it you, Giles."

"I, it wasn't. Head, His Head was taken by Ganoa! I, it wasn't me!"

".....I see. In that case, he will be sent to the underworld after you.....Prepare yourself, Giles."

Ralphus's sword sung as it was removed from its scabbard.

With eyes narrowed sharply, and taking a stance that left no openings——Ralphus was overwhelming.

Giles had always considered Ralphus a quiet individual who liked and was liked by everybody. But now, as his body shook from the fear he felt, he realized.

All he had known up until this time was merely a fraction of the person standing in front of him now.

Don't mess with me! There's no way I can take this guy! If anybody would be a match for him, it could only be that monster, Rain.

"W, wait a moment. There's no need to be so hasty. Right? Sunkwoll is going to be destroyed, there is no mistaking that. Even us mercenaries have to think about which side to choose, wouldn't you agree?"

Straightening himself in a way that would cause no alarm, Giles laughed brokenly.

Ralphus only lowered his eyebrows in response.

With the sound of metal scrapping metal, Ralphus swung his sword up to stop just before Gilles's nose.

"Giles! At his last moment, let's see the mercenary hold his sword up like a knight."

Looking into Ralphus's eyes, Giles only shuddered.

He's serious! He's really going to——

"M, my reward! What I was going to receive, I'll give you everything! S, so at least let me live!"

"That's pathetic, Giles!"

Ralphus swung his sword.

Raising his voice to a feverish shout, Giles turned around and tried to run.

"You Fool!" was all he heard before a burning sensation on his back caused him to loose consciousness for eternity.

"If I could, I would have avoided attacking when your back was turned."

Ralphus shook his head, looking down at the sprawled corpse of Giles.

Swinging his sword in a half-arc to let the blood fly off, Ralphus returned it to its scabbard.

"Nothin' we can do 'bout it. He tried to run in the most dishonorable way. He chose his own path."

Gwen stated, spitting at the ground.

It seemed he was in no mood to show sympathy to Giles.

Most likely Nigel, looking coldly down at Giles, felt the same way.

"Besides that, Lord General. It seems the guys from Zarmine weren't planning on helping him from the start. Makes you wonder, don' it?"

Ralphus responded in a low tone.

"It is not all that strange. To them, it's just a way to have any obstacles finish themselves off. It's great to not have to lift a finger to get something done."

"——I see. In other words, they had been planning on killing Giles from the start. Just use and throw away.....vile."

Gwen spat again.

Judging from his face, he was really upset.

It wasn't as if Ralphus was in a good mood either, but it was different.

He turned his gaze to the multitude of Zarmine soldiers, searching for Ganoa.

Perhaps because he had already slipped behind their back lines, Ralphus couldn't see him anywhere.

Even so he continued to search without giving up. While he was still looking, the high pitch of a whistle being blown entered his ears.

There was no reason to worry about the meaning of the signal. The black formation covering the entire land began moving, causing the land to reverberate in response. Their objective was most likely the annihilation of Ralphus and his unit.

All the other units had either been wiped out, or managed to flee.

"Seems like we'll have to put Ganoa aside for now."

"——Yeah..."

Gwen nodded in agreement.

Without showing any signs of nervousness, Nigel continued to calmly watch the army moving their way.

.....At least these two he wanted to see live through this.

"Gwen, Nigel..you should——"

"Don' go there, Lord General."

"Our minds are made up."

The moment Ralphus had opened his mouth to speak, they had cut in.

".....Alright."

Ralphus couldn't say more than that.

These two seemed ready no matter what to take on the same fate. At this point even if he gave an order, it would be pointless.

Looking at his two faithful aides before turning his gaze to the rest of his men, Ralphus mounted his beloved steed, taking the rains in his hands.

"In that case! There are no longer any words I can give! Let us show our enemies our spirit to the end!"

"ALRIGHT!"

The roar from the men at his back, Ralphus shot out on his horse like an arrow released from a bow.

Aiming for the center of the enemy multitude, they charged straight ahead.

The enemy forces steadily grew closer. Before coming into direct contact, Ralphus stopped his horse just once, bellowing his name.

"My name is Ralphus Juliard Sunkwoll! Any who wish to fight me, come to the front!"

Zarmine's soldiers balked for a moment, and in the next began to swarm wildly to his position.

"This is surprising. It seems a man by the name of Ralphus has come charging at us."
Luminas, one of the main commanders of the Zarmine forces, said.

A pointed chin and pale complexion were the markings of the thirty-something military man. The black armor wrapping his body really didn't suit him. Those eyes which showed no underestimating, were directed intently at the enemy before him.

Ralphus was at the head of a small group that was coming intently towards his location. In reality he didn't want to deal with it, but at the same time he was impressed.

"Hmph. Now that is what I would call a true soldier. Compared to Ganoa or Giles who switched so easily to our side, it is like the difference between the clouds and the mud. Even more, wouldn't he be royalty? He most definitely said the name Sunkwoll."

A higher-up riddled with muscles all over his body said to Luminus, stroking his long beard. He had golden locks, and his face looked as though it were chiseled from stone. He was much older than Luminas.

He was the commander of this expeditionary force, Garblake.

"Actually, due to his exploits throughout the years, Ralphus has been granted use of the name

Sunkwoll.....if we were ever to have an ally, he would have been the most desirable."
Luminas said, in a tone showing both how much he wished for it, and how much he knew it would never happen.

Even before looking into him, it was obvious he was a man who highly valued faithfulness. If he had been someone who could have been swayed by land or money, they already would have made a move.

Most people moved in the direction of the money. Even so, there were some who had no inkling towards fortune.

"If we won't be able to have him join us now.....then what should be done?"

Garblake asked regretfully.

Luminas' reply was exactly according to his prediction.

The enemy had just arrived before them. This fight would most likely not be a very long one.

"Of course we will kill him. If we can't make him an ally, then he is only another enemy."

"No helping it, huh."

"Yes."

Luminas responded shortly.

No matter how skilled the soldiers were, on the empty plain with no strategy, just the sheer difference in numbers would decide the outcome of the battle.

After all, the most decisive factor in determining the outcome of any confrontation, was military might.

If a multitude collides with a small group repeatedly, the multitude will always win. That is an ultimate truth on the battlefield.

Only.....it's not as if there was nothing nagging at the back of his mind.

It was none other than Rain.

Actually the Sunkwoll General Luminas had always been warned about, was the 'Unknown Genius,' which was Rain.

From multiple reports, it was confirmed that Rain was currently under house arrest. The reason seems to have been his opposition to the strategy at the war council.

It was reasonable to see it as him trying to avoid going into a losing fight, but even so was he the kind of man who would abandon his friends?

From what reports told him, he and Ralphus were quite close friends.....
That was the part where Luminas came up blank. To put it simply, he thought there might be a trap somewhere.

But, if that were the case and there really was a strategy, what about Ralphus' reckless actions?

——In other words, it could be assumed Rain hadn't let Ralphus in on his plan. *Am I thinking too much...*

Garblake interrupted Luminas' musings.

"Is there anything bothering you?"

"Well..... Nothing much, just that companion of Ralphus, Rain has me a little worried." Luminas explained his concerns.

"——In other words, it's possible that guy might try something."

"Yes. Now that I think about it, His Majesty gave a warning about Rain. But he should be in his castle at the moment. Even if there is a mistake in the information, a few or a lot of soldiers would still be no match for the multitude we have."

".....That man is dangerous. I don't want to be brush him off here."

Luminas said carefully, coming dangerously close to going against his superiors with that statement.

He had plenty of reasons for being careful of Rain. But he thought it wouldn't be appropriate to mention them to Garblake under the current circumstances.

Besides, Garblake was showing little interest in Luminas' ramblings.

He snorted out his nose, looking at Luminas as though he were being foolish.

And then, a complaint.

"I don't give a damn about Rain. That aside, what's wrong, Luminas. They are breaking through. Hurry up and give an order. We have plenty of reserves to call on."

Luminas started at Galbreak's words, and looked around at the battle.

Ralphus' unit had split into two, an advanced and rear guard, which came slicing into their formation. It was commendable for such a small unit. But it still didn't even come close to turning the tide of the battle.

Vehemently charging into their ranks with such a small group really couldn't do much to the foreseeable outcome.

"There is no helping it. He is a commendable man, but we should hurry up and finish this soon."

Luminas orders five-thousand of his men to split into two groups, and flank Ralphus' unit on both sides. It was the end.

The units began moving after receiving his order. Luminas and Garblake followed the movement with their eyes.

——Only...

"Huh?"

For some reason a mist had entered his field of vision.

Thinking it had only appeared faintly, it began to grow thicker and whiter.

"Ah..."

It seemed Garblake had noticed it as well.

The far off forest, and the unit——they were both dissolving into the mist. Even more, it began getting thicker and thicker.

"What's that, mist?"

"No, it's...Shit! It's magic!"

The mist had grown so white it looked like milk, and had encompassed both friend and foe alike. Luminas hurriedly retracted his previous order.

At this rate there was the possibility of attacking their own men.

"What's the meaning of this, Luminas!?"

"It has to be the enemies magic. Most likely several magic users are forming the mist with their spells."

"What!?"

You've one upped us, Rain.

Luminas exhaled slowly. There was no one besides Rain he could think of that would intervene at this point. It seemed he couldn't leave Ralphus to die after all.

His lookouts were using Magic Vision, and so he knew Rain hadn't moved from his castle. In that case it must be some of his subordinates.

He had just been out-maneuvered, but for some reason he didn't feel that upset.

"Luminas, we can't make a move at this rate....." "Yeah. We can't afford to have our men striking one another down. "Send out some scouts to the surrounding areas, and see if we can't find the ones casting the magic."

Luminas gave his opinion, while at the same time knowing it would be nearly impossible to find such a small number of people under these conditions.

It would seem they could only wait for the mist to clear.

——You've gotten in a blow. But Rain, you can't run if all you do is run. In the end, we will still be the victors.

Atop his horse Luminas folded his arms across his chest, waiting for the mist to lift.

Ralphus was engrossed in the battle, not noticing the mist until it had covered him so completely that he had to stop his horse.

The Zarmine soldiers were retreating because of the same fear of striking an ally.

".....It seems we've been spared, Lord General."

Gwen exhaled slowly, drawing his horse close.

As though trying to tell the tale of his fighting, his armor was cracked and scratched all over. It was the same for Nigel.

"Gwen, you're in a bad way!"

There were punctures here and there in his armor, and from the holes blood could be seen dripping steady down. Ralphus dismounted his horse hurriedly.

Gwen held out his hand to stop him.

"It's nothing to get all worked up over, Lord General. Nothing has hit the bone yet. But yourself, Lord General, it seems you've been bearing some stomach pains?"

".....It's only a scratch to me."

Ralphus said firmly, brushing it aside. It was definitely more than a scratch, but not something life threatening.

"Really this mist couldn't have had better timing. It's a miracle, Lord General."

"Gwen, miracles don't happen so easily. This is Rain's handiwork. Either that, or one of his men."

"N, no way. You're reading too much into it."

".....Someone is coming."

Nigel said softly, interrupting their conversation.

Now that it was mentioned, the sound of footsteps could be heard. Someone was approaching casually.

"An enemy!?"

Gwen said, bringing his large ax to bear. Nigel gripped his spear.

But Ralphus, having an inkling on who it could be, didn't move.

"The two of you, lower your weapons. This is, most likely, alright."

Before he finished, a man riding a black stallion came into sight through the thick mist.

"Is this Sir Ralphus before me?"

The man halted his horse, looking intently at Ralphus.

His body was thin, so much so that he could easily be mistaken for a woman. He wore no armor, having only a heavy cloak on top of his shirt.

He had the black hair and green eyes were the tell-tale signs on a Sunkwoll commoner, but his eyes were uncannily sharp. His expression made him seem to be looking at something undesirable. Or else it might just be his natural expression.

"Yes, I am Ralphus. And who might you be?"

Upon hearing his response, the man nodded his head stiffly from atop his horse.

"I apologize for the tardiness. I am called Gunther Valoa. Under orders from my master, Rain, I have come to get Sir Ralphus."

Gunther introduced himself rather unpleasantly.

"I thought so."

Ralphus sighed, looking at Gwen from the corner of his eye.

"Is he here as well, then?"

"No. Rain wanted to, but I kept him from coming. The enemy will more likely be off-guard if my Lord remains in Cortecreas Castle."

".....I see. But that he would send you... I thought I was fairly familiar with Rain's acquaintances, but this is the first time we have met."

"Rain has kept me back for just such a time and place as this. I am the leader of the intelligence

and tools division. That aside, we must hurry up and pull back. My subordinates are working at keeping the mist thick, but magic is a limited resource."

Gunther said to Ralphus is a slightly irritated tone of voice. Most likely there wasn't much time left.

Ralphus looked silently into the depths of the mist. Gwen, Nigel and the rest of his men looked at their Leader without speaking.

Finally, Ralphus spoke in a distressed tone.

"I was hoping to be dead before Rain stuck his hand in to help. I have no intention of escaping punishment for the sin of letting His Majesty die. My feelings still haven't changed."

"You mean you are talking about dying in this place?"

Gunther confirmed, the color of his face never changing.

"That's right. There is something I want you to tell Rain when you return. I want him to live and watch over the Princess. Zarmine would never just be content to leave her be.. And if possible, I'd like you to take my men with you."

"NO!"

Silent until this last line, Gwen burst in.

"That's already closed. We've all decided to follow you wherever you go."

"But....."

"Anyway, that isn't something I can relay to Rain."

Gunther broke in to the arguing.

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"To me, Rain's orders are absolute. I have no intention of returning without you. It's not what I wished for, but I will just have to die with you."

His expression never changing, Gunther said so matter of factly.

"WHAT!?"

Ralphus looked intently at his face, wondering if he was serious.

A steady gaze stared back at him. Not even his pupils wavered.

Just what kind of man was he... He didn't appear to be a noble, but still he had a last name.

"You are choosing death, then? In that case I must entrust what happens next to my subordinates. Then...!"

"W, wait!"

Ralphus moved to block the way of Gunther who was just heading off.

"Is there something else?"

Gunther said, as though there was no greater disturbance that this.

It was rare to find someone who cared so little about living or dying. Saying he would stay with Ralphus and die along side him, it's not like he had any attachment to him.

For the first time, Ralphus's heart wavered.

If he did nothing, this man would die. Looking at his eyes, he knew it wasn't a bluff.

In other words, because of him, one of Rain's trusted men would die.

No, the problem wasn't just Gunther Out of all Ralphus's men, not one tried to leave.

Even though Ralphus didn't want anyone to go down the same path.

What should I do... What should I do!

"Lord General....."

"General....."

Gwen and Nigel looked at Ralphus with concern.

Gunther looked at their display without any change, and seeming to remember something all of a sudden,

"That's right, there was a message I forgot to relay."

".....What is it?"

Ralphus's expression showed his confusion.

Gunther said in a calm voice,

"Rain has asked me to give this message. The problem in a brawl isn't the method. It' who is

standing at the end."

"That's all?"
Ralphus broke out into a bitter smile, but Gunther remained the same as always as he continued.

"Not that I think about it, he mentioned this as well. 'Don't push all the responsibility on me, you fool!'"

"That sounds just like him."

Even at a time like this, Ralphus couldn't help but chuckle.

He didn't mean for it to happen, but his shoulders started to shake, and he let out a huge laugh. He didn't even care about the looks from his men.

"So, what will you do? Are there no changes in your decision? I am in a hurry."

Gunther said, his expression one of impatience. His eyebrows were pulled together, almost making one single brow. *That face is a shame to his features.*

Ralphus finally stopped laughing, and responded strongly.

"I've changed my mind. It seems Rain has a plan for victory yet. I'll be betting on that."

".....A more bothersome decision. If that was the case, then you should have said so sooner."

Gunther responded in an irritated manner.

Chapter 3: Shelfa, Departure from Galfort Castle

Because Zarmine's capital Riagull was located at an important center for a vast conjointment of highways that diverged all over the continent, it was a lively city with merchants always coming and going.

Accordingly, the standard of living for the citizens was quite high compared with other countries, and so there were many in the upper-class.

Currently, Zarmine was in the midst of continuous wins in all their military campaigns, so in turn this prosperity could only continue to increase.

Situated nearly dead-center in the capital city, was Leygur's newly rennovated castle, Geynis Castle.

It was a magnificant castle.

It was surrounded by two deep moats filled with water and an immensely tall wall.
However, even though not much time had passed since the rennovation, it could not really be said to be eye-catching. After all, there was not even a single decoration.

The outer walls and structure were made of the same stones that laid the foundation, and the gate and walls had nothing on them that didn't serve some form of useful purpose.
This was because the castle's owner, King Leygur, wasted no emotion on such things.

In the large audience chamber, kneeled before the King was the prime minister, whose voice resounded through the hall as he gave his report.

Within this great hall there wasn't a single covering on the stone floor, none that is, except for a single line of scarlet carpet which ran from the hall's entrance, to the King's throne.

A chandelier attached to the roof far above, and a vast majority of candles on the wall ensured there was ample lighting, but even so the dreary room had a cold and unwelcomming feel.

There were no flowers in vases to decorate, nor pictures on the wall.

The room was a rather desolate choice for the throne to be in.

"……According to our reports using Magic Vision, we have taken King Douglas's head. All that's left now is to advance into Sunkwoll itself. Your Majesty, your orders, please."

One of the spells magicians had at their disposal was 'Magic Vision,' a spell that could send images and scenery to another no matter how far the distance.

Thanks to the spell, Jageel could receive updates on the battle practically in realtime.

To employ so many magicians in military service in this day and age, was a luxury afforded only to the larger Kingdoms.

And so, after giving his report, Jageel awaited King Leygur's order. But, the King remained

silent.

After waiting a while and receiving no reply, he lifted his head.

The King wearing his black ceremonial clothes made of light silk, had his eyes closed as though asleep, contemplating.

His long silky silver hair covered half of his face, but even so King Leygur's handsome features were noticeable.

"Your Majesty?"

Jageel tried again.

Leygur continued to remain silent.

He couldn't actually have fallen asleep...

Exasperated he started to rise. But——

As though he had been watching him, Leygur's eyes opened. He gazed down at his retainer, well past middle age.

Jageel's body shook as he gazed into the King's black eyes which resembled darkness itself. Hurriedly he again bent his knee.

He had no intention of making the King angry. For one, he was the man who had overthrown the late King five years previously, succeding to the throne. If it happened, his neck would be all too easy to cut. Afterall just a few days earlier several men had revolted, and had been cut down mercilessly. Even though they were all well-renowned generals.

"I've heard the report, but was there no word from Galbreak about Rain?"

Leygur said in a chilled tone.

Jageel quickly lowered his head.

"Nothing. All we've heard is that the King has been killed."

As though hearing something distasteful, Leygur scrunched up his face.

Again he lapsed into thought.

Jageel racked his brain, thinking. He had no idea what the man before him was thinking. Why did he concern himself so much with just one male commoner?

For someone like Jageel who had been born to a family of nobles through generations, a male commoner was a valueless existance with nothing to have pride in.
Now someone like that aristocrat Ralphus, that was one to be cautious about.

Disregarding him and his thoughts, the King spoke gravely.

"...Send an asassination group after Rain and make sure there are a large number of well-skilled men."

"I see. Assassins.....you say?"

"Yes. Choose those who have proven themselves adept. As for the number, let's see...at the least more than ten. In turn, there is no need for the army to advance on Sunkwoll yet."

"Understood..."

Is he really putting so much importance on that man...? His disgruntlement caused him to forget his feaer of King Leygur for a moment.

"You Majesty, certainly Rain has been gifted with talent. But he is only a commoner. Is he really a presence to focus so exclsively on?"

The King didn't respond immediately. But after a short wait, he replied.

"Is there really that much difference from nobility?"

A cold sweat ran down Jageel's back.

He had overstepped his bounds. He had forgotten, but King Leygur himself had come rolling in from somewhere as an ordinary commoner only a decade previously.

"P, please, your forgiveness!"

His teeth not aligning properly due to his fear, he bowed his head so low it was almost touching the floor.

Leygur stood up from his throne.

The heavy sound of the King's boots on the floor drew closer to Jageel.

He thought he heard the sound of wind being sliced as that demon blade swung towards his neck.

"Y, Your Majesty! Please! Please!"

Right before his eyes he could see black footwear. Unable to lift his face, he could only continue grovelling for forgiveness.

A long time passed. By the time he finally prepared himself for death, Leygur finally spoke.

"Jageel, you may lift you face."
At the same time, there was the sound of a cloak swishing.....the indication of the King

returning.

H, have I really...been saved?

His head shaking with fear, he watched as Leygur returned to his throne as though nothing had happened.

"Jageel."

"Y, yes!"

"As a civil official, there are still many more uses I have for you. To that extent, I will forget your earlier comment. So do as I have commanded...is that understood?"

"Yes! R, right away!"

"Don't forget this feeling of fear, now. Let me warn you now, if you ever say something like that again, I will have your head....."

"I will never forget, never."

Jageel again lowered his head deeply to the stone floor.

"It'd be nice if that were true."

Leygur said to himself.

"Rain, show me your strength. Don't disappoint me....."

His voice was so soft, the words never made it to the ears of the old retainer.

☆——☆——☆

Meanwhile, in the courtyard of Rain's Castle, Cortecleas——

Yuri was walking among the intermittently placed flowerbeds scattered over the grounds.

Already ten days had passed since her arrival, but she had easily blended in with the castle's atmosphere.

It was easy to be on familiar terms with the soldiers, as most of them were once mercenaries, and their personalities were similar to hers.

Well, there were aides like Xenoa that were difficult to get along with. But Yuri was put under Leni's watch, so she didn't have to deal with her directly.

Leni was rather easy-going, and so Yuri really didn't have any problems.

——Besides the fact that all Rain did was sleep.

Yes, that Rain locked himself in his room since returning, and hardly ever came out. When he did, it was only to grab something to eat or drink some alchohol, which really got on her nerves.

Now isn't the time for that! It's a bit twisted, but Yuri was getting impatient at Rain for not raising his hand against Zarmine already.

It seemed Xenoa thought the same way, and the look she threw at him grew more aggitated every day. One day she might snap magnificently.

But the most unexpected thing, is how much everyone, apart from Xenoa, seemed to respect Rain. He was really popular.

Even though Rain had opted to avoid fighting this time, nearly all of his men agreed with his decision. It may be because they, as former mercenaries, wanted to avoid fights they couldn't win. It wasn't that she couldn't understand that, but.....

"Jeez. He can really put people in suspence."

Yuri scrunched up her face, kicking a stone at her feet.

"Hm?"

She could hear cheering from somewhere.

Turning her eyes towards the sound, she noticed a group of soldiers forming a circle close to the wall, in the middle of something.

Yuri who had an immense curiosity, turned her feet in that direction.

"Ah!...Captain Leni."

In the middle of the circle of people, she saw Leni holding two slightly shorter-than-normal blades, one in each hand. He was facing one of his men.

It seemed they were in the middle of a swordsmanship lesson.

"Heh~...Captain Leni is a two-sword fighter."

A little impressed, Yuri watched from outside the crowd of people.

The man facing off against Leni was breathing heavily, and seemed tired. It was hard to image, but it seemed Leni was pushing him back.

Shing!

Drawing his sword, the armor-clad soldier had made up his mind and moved. Keeping himself low, he closed in on Leni, watching him closely. But he didn't move.

He must have thought he could do it, as the soldier moved with a speed that couldn't be made fun of, and brought his sword up to the nape of Leni's neck.

Clang!

The sound of metal on metal reverberated.

The certain-kill move was stopped by Leni's blade, while his other swung up to stop just short of the soldiers throat.

Wow! I couldn't even see that just now! This guy is strong.....

Surprised, Yuri thought she ought to take Leni more seriously. She had thought he was only a gentle aide, but it seemed he also had some real skill.

"Okay, that ends this match. It's already noon, so we'll call it a day for now. Dismissed!"

Leni ordered, fixing a grievence with his blond hair.

"Al' righ'!"

The cheer was just as one would expect from the once-mercenaries, Yuri thought, watching them start to disperse.

"Captain Leni!"

Yuri jogged lightly to catch up, and Leni met her with a content and smiling expression.

"Woah! Yuri-chan! Were you watching?"

"Yeah. Captain, you're really strong. I'm impressed."

"N, no, I'm not that good."

Leni's face grew red as he denied her praise, embarrased.

Then, as though he had just thought of something good, he clapped his hands together.

"Hey, since we're off for lunch, what do you say we eat together? I've got plenty extra."

"Thanks for the food!"

Her stomach just having told her how hungry it was, Yuri responded energetically. She livied by the principle of never turning down free food.

"Is it really alright?"

The two of them sat down on one of the many wooden benches.

She only asked to be polite.

Even though they sat down on the same bench, Yuri left some space between her and Leni.

"Today I've got sandwiches."

Leni smiled broadly, spreading out the cloth-wrapped items. An unexpectadly large lunch-box met her gaze, and most definitely more than enough sandwiches were inside.

"Wow! Well, I won't be holding back."

"Go ahead, go ahead."

As she had said, Yuri quickly stretched out her hand.

"It's delicious!"

It was surprisingly good for just a meat-and-vegetable sandwich. Yuri held her cheeks in both hands, showing her deeply moved expression.

"Hahaha. Eat all you want."

"Thank you very much!"

For a while her undivided attention was on the food.

Becoming concious of something, she looked at the smiling Leni and asked,

"By the way, that practice you were doing earlier, does Rain not participate?"

"Hmm? Well, about once or twice a year he'll spar with someone. Usually he's just always running away. He says it's because of how troublesome it is."

Yuri's returned stare was bright, and Leni could only shrug his shoulders.

It was an action that revealed how much he'd given up on trying.

"It's just like him.....Just out of curiousity but, Captain Leni, you or General Rain, who is stronger?"

The second the question was out, Leni jumped lightly. His expression seemed to say 'What are you talking about?'

"Me? I don't even come close the soles of his feet. There's nothing to mention.....comparing us is a problem in and of itself."

"Hehh.....the General is that strong, then."
"...? Yuri-chan, were you not aquantances with the General?"

Leni asked, wonderingly.

"Eh! Ah, well our fathers knew each other, but the General and I aren't really....."

Breaking into a cold sweat, Yuri quickly thought up an excuse.

Thankfully, Leni easily accepted her explanation. Beyond that, he actually gave a huge grin.

"Hehhh, ah, so that's how it is. Hehehe."

"Uhmm?"

"Ah, sorry sorry. We were talking about if the General is strong? Hands down, he's strong. More than he'll let on, even with all his bragging."

Yuri opened her eyes wide without thinking.

"Are you...serious?"

"Yep. At the very least, I never, ever, would want to be on his bad side. Compared to him, I'd take on Zarmine any day."

Scrunching his eyebrows, Leni shook. It seemed he was actually feeling it.

*He's really that strong then.....*Yuri thought to herself.

Leni continued in full force.

"You might not think of it, but I'm sure he could even defeat a Dragon. I've never heard of anyone doing so, but if it was the General, I'm sure he could do it."

Woah, slow down. No matter what that's too much.

Out of all the species on the earth, the Dragon was undoubtedly the strongest of them all. Their magical power, magical cancellation field, powerful breath and overwhelming muscles, no matter what other creature you took, they wouldn't be able to lay a scratch on a Dragon. They had no natural enemies.

Since long ago, it was said that "Any man who defeats a Dragon in one-on-one combat, would receive its strength and magical power".

The number of those since ancient times who believed this to be true, and had gone up against this strongest of magical beasts was endless.

Not even the wind carried in a rumor of someone having actually defeated one. A Dragon Slayer's existance could only be found in the songs sung by minstrels.

If there was anyone that would stand a chance against a Dragon, it would only be the Magus, a

race long gone from this earth.

Their outward appearance indistiguishable from humans, Magus with their magic and physical strength might...but then they may not be enemies with the magical beasts. Needless, they had all died out over a thousand years ago, when the great wars with the humans for control of the world had taken place, so the truth was uncertain.

Leni gave a strained laugh, watching Yuri's expression which seemed to shout 'unbelievable!'.

"I know it's hard to believe. But someday, you too Yuri will come to see that man's strength. The General is different from any other human."

"I see..."

——Of course she knew he was strong, but...

I can't understand....Yuri shook her head softly.

No matter what Leni says, in this world there is always someone stronger. She, who had been in Zarmine had seen with her own very eyes those with impossible strength. Still vivid in her memory was the image of the long, silver-haired King.

An uncountable number of criminals lined up at the execution grounds, and King Leygur who stood before them all.

Surely he was using that for his own practice.

Even so, some tens of criminals all sank into a sea of blood, not one remaining...that was what you called a monster.

No matter how strong Rain was, he could never win against him.....*That is certain.*

Lost in her thoughts, all of a sudden the sandwich she had been holding vanished.

"Wha...?"

She was dumbstruck for only a moment.

Between Leni and Yuri, a horse's long neck had stuck itself out. Chewing loudly, that horse with beautiful white hair shoved its face into the lunchbox next, taking the remaining sandwiches.

The sound of it's liesurely chewing was clearly audible.

"Y, you stupid horse! Chris, right!?"
The horse may not have spoken agreement, but Chris looked sideways at Yuri, seeming to say just that.

.....It was no wonder she would be dumbstruck.
"Sh...!——You know, you really tick me off!"

"Hey, Chris. Like always, you eat anything, don't you. I can't think of you as a horse. You want some of this, too?"

Leni broke off a part of his sandwich and held it out. Christ snapped it up, and all the sandwiches were gone.

"Wait a minute, Captain! Why are you spoiling her like that! First off, why is a horse here instead of being tied up!"

"Eh. W, well you see...the General has ordered that we don't tie Chris up in the stable. That's why she's always walking around wherever she pleases."

"Why'd he make a rule like that!"

"Dunno."

Leni tilted his head sideways. He didn't have any bad intentions, but his face which said 'How should I know,' only served to make upset Yuri even more.

"According to the General, Chris is his companion, and what's more, a Pegasaus, so it would be rude to tie her up. But, I wonder if a Pegasaus really exists."

"That's not even worth answering!"

Yuri banged on the bench. In resposne, Leni stretched his muscles, saying,

"S, sorry! That's right, of course, hahaha."

Yuri glared sharply at the captain. Then abruptly, she stood up.

Resting both hands on her hips, she stared at the spoiled horse, eyes glinting.

"Chris! The sin of stealing another's lunch is great! Get it!?"

The horse paid her no heed.

Chris snorted through her nostrils, shifting her gaze. As though deciding there would be no more food for her, she promptly turned her rear to Yuri.

Anybody watching would have marked it as a coincidence, but as Chris turned around, her swishing tail twacked Yuri's cheek forcefully. With that, Chris trotted off.

"What a crappy horse. Must take after its master."

As Yuri stamped her feet in frustration, Leni spoke quietly.

"Well, I don't think you're at any kind of disadvantage....."
Yuri completely ignored the comment.

At that moment, in the highest part of the castle, Rain was resting on the bed in his room. There was nothing special about the inside of his bedroom, and for the room belonging to the lord of the castle, it was quite modest. the bed was just average, nothing like the great four-posters with an awning the nobles favored so much.

There was a round table in the center of the room, and quite a few bottles of alchohol atop it. Rain had drained them all.

"Jeez, what a day."

Sighing suddenly, he unfurled the letter he had already read several times. Having reached the castle the same time he had returned, it was as if the letter Ralphus sent had been pursuing him.

Still lying on his side, he read the short letter.

"Gah..."

No matter how many times he read it, he still groaned. Ralphus's chivalry was enough to make anyone grow tired of it.

The first half of the letter was alright.

As always he was telling Rain to stop drinking so much, be careful of any epidemics, things a mother would say. It was just like him.

The problem was with the second half.

Incidentally, Rain.
I have no idea how you came to make aquantances with the princess, but if this battle should end in a loss, her life will be at risk.
Since it seems you two are close, I want you to lend your strength to protect the Princess for me.
One more thing.....I have no intention of saying anything about your relationship, but think of your position and age, and don't do anything rash (you know what I mean).
Okay?
That's all.

"What do mean 'that's all'?"

Aggitated, Rain slammed the letter down on the sideboard.

He was someone who said a bunch of crazy things. According to the words, it seemed he was asking Rain to take care of the Princess, but he hadn't even met her before.

It seems he thinks I'd make a move on the Princess, but no matter how great I am, I can't do

something to someone I've never seen before.

First of all, she was the daughter of that stuffy King, so he could imagine what she'd be like.

He wanted to tell Ralphus to give him a break.

Even knowing that he disliked the nobility, let alone royalty! Furthermore, it was the King's daughter! No doubt she would be thick and stuffy, unable to do any housekeeping, with no skills other than nagging and being bossy, a real hag.

There was nothing he knew of in this world that he was afraid to go up against. But even so, Ralphus asked this of him knowing he would do it for him.

"Well, whatever. I'll do something about it when I go to get Michelle."

Rain said, after his grumblings ended.

That lonely, beautiful girl he had met back then floated to the back of his mind.

But right now, he was most worried about Ralphus. After all, right now he was most likely in the midst of fighting.

It was this point which cast a wrench into his calculations. Zarmine seemed to be paying special heed of him, more so that anticipated. According to Yuri, there were an uncountable number of eyes watching him.

If he were to leave his castle, that information would go flying to Zarmine. Then perhaps he may not be able to save Ralphus.

To Rain, whatever happened to King Douglas, he wouldn't feel a thing. Ralphus was the only one he needed to save.

"I'd be haunted with remorse. That's the only reason."

Rain said, trying to convince himself that was the reason.

At the very least, he had a debt he needed to repay. It's not like he had asked him to, but he had helped him escape the King's wrath numerous times.

Even if Rain had saved Ralphus's life once, the debt was still his to be paid.

But Ralphus kept going on about how thankful he was for that. "That time, I can't even begin to describe how much you looked after me."

What a good-natured. guy.

Thanks to that, it puts me through a lot of trouble.

On the other hand, it was that quality which would keep Ralphus from giving up and running

away from this old country, Sunkwoll.

In other words, in order to help him, it would mean having to take on and send into retreat, the entire country of Zarmine.

After all, Ralphus was the kind of idiot who would even get needlessly fired up about taking on hundreds of thousands by himself.

"I hope Gunther was able to manage alright..."

Rain ground his teeth at his inability to act. Just maybe, purposefully getting himself put under house arrest had been a mistake...

No matter how much of a disadvantage it was, maybe he should have gone with that idiotic King anyway...

"Fina.....have I made a mistake...?"

The moment Rain uttered those words softly,

BANG!

With a force that was not to joke about, without so much as a knock first, the door opened. No...it was kicked open.

Turning his head he saw Yuri, both feet out in a stance that had her blocking the doorway.

"Just a minute, there!"

She thrust her pointer-finger in Rain's direction.

"Who's this Fina!?"

".....eh?"

"Don't 'eh?' me!"

Yuri in a blouse and skirt, entered into Rain's room, coming to stand by the foot of his bed. It was hard to tell which was the master.

The next moment, she started speaking in full force.

"In the first place, you really think it's okay for you to act like this? To keep on lying on your bed with all these empty bottles around, it's not stylish at all! It's too undercut! It's because of this you ended up getting put under house arrest! What's more, I'm here to talk to you about your stupid horse..."

"Ahhh! You're so annoying!"
If he hadn't interuppted, this abuse seemed like it would continue for a while.

"I'm in the middle of contemplating on extremely important issues right now! I've no time to play with you! If your going to come to me, make it when there is a matter of utter importance, or when you're wearing lace underwear!"

"What'd you say——don't go to sleep!"

"So noisy."

Ready to fall back onto the sheets, Rain instead lifted his head and got up reluctantly.

He sat on the side of his bed, and looked Yuri, standing aggresively.

"Okay, so what is it. By the way, I knew from your presence, but what were you doing evesdropping outside someone's room."

"Hmmph. Even though you have nothing to say that would be a problem if overheard. I really put my all into coming here. Oh yeah, and who's this Fina?"

".....Don't be jumping all over the place. Furthermore, I have no idea what you mean."

Rain pointed out he had no energy to spare for this, then, as though thinking of something, smiled devilishly.

"W, what's with that smile...?"

Yuri retreated with an unpleasant expression.

"It's nothing, really. You know, going from your black hair and unique eye color, you're a commoner of Sunkwoll, right?"

".....and if I am?"

"Let me get right to the point. ——Would you switch sides?"

Yuri took a deep breath, blinking her light green eyes. With an unreadable expression, she looked back at Rain. He thought he could detect her pulse.

"Your doing this for a living, even though you don't want to, right? This country is hard on its commoners after all. But if the reward is good enough, there's no reason for you to be on the enemies side, right?"

"That's.....I suppose so. It's not like I feel good about it all."
"Right, right? In that case, how does twenty silver coins a month sound?"

"Twenty coins...that would be fifty-thousand taran? Hmmm~, let me hear a little more."

Yuri grandly bent herself forward.
"Alright, then how about twenty-one silver coins."

"You know, your not good with increments. Your a man, right? Then you should be more flashy!"

Rain grimaced, shaking his head.

"Idiot. The master of a castle has to constantly be careful with his money. ——How does twenty-five sound?"

"What's a guy who chugs expensive liquor saying...! My younger sister...I mean I have to consider my younger brother's tuition!"

"A guy? I don't care. How about I buy your future womanly promise, and we'll do thirty silver! Take it already, you thief!"

"I'm in!"

Yuri clapped her hands, her eyes sparkling.

She drew close to Rain.

"You'll definitely be giving me thirty silver a month, alright?"

"Yeah. But in return, you'd best work hard."

"Sure! Great~! Now I don't have to lie to my little sis...I mean brother, anymore!"

Yuri danced happily. It seems that for their livelihood, she had been keeping the fact she was a spy from her relations.

"Ah, there's just one thing——"

"What is it?"

"If I had refused the offer.....what would you have done?"

Yuri cutely tilted her head.

Rain let out an evil sounding laugh.

"I would have informed the country of Zarmine that you had switched sides. Even if that information was false, they still wouldn't use you any more, I'd wager. There's nothing else but to come to this side."

".....contemptible, you are."

Yuri opened her mouth wide as she spoke.

*Guess so...*Rain seemed to say with his chest puffed out wikedly. At that moment...

Near the center of the room light started to flicker, beginning to take on a form.
"Magic Vision?" Yuri asked.

Rain didn't get a chance to respond as the light solidified, taking the shape of a man with sharp eyes.

It need not be said, but he was actually very far away.

".....Who's that really unpleasant looking guy that seems to be depressed with life?"

"Later, later. This is an important report."

Rain cut Yuuri off sharply.

Judging from the timing, it had to be about Ralphus's rescue.

"Reporting, Lord Rain."

To support his words, Gunther bowed deeply before Rain.

☆——☆——☆

Deep in an inner garden of the Royal Palace, Shelfa was all alone.

Currently, Galfort Castle was wrapped in a lonely silence. Until yesterday it had been bustling with people preparing to run, but now they were all gone, and hardly anyone was left.

To one side of the garden leaning against a tree near a small pond, Shelfa gazed at the water's surface.

It was her favorite spot.

It was always quiet, but today was exceptionally so.

At most there was only the rustling of the trees branches above her head.

Even though it was noon, the sound of people talking and the hustle and bustle of daily life was nowhere to be found.

"This castle has become really empty..."

Shelfa murmured.

She knew the reason. Yesterday, the chief retainers had learned of the defeat through "magic vision."

At first none of them believed it, but as the details became clear, the mood turned to one of despair.

All of the generals who had gone on the campaign, save Ralphus, were dead. Even her father had been betrayed and killed.

A strict order had been given to keep the report quiet, but the rumors had started spreading in the blink of an eye.

After all, it was impossible to seal the lips of man.

According to the rumors, from the prime minister to the chief retainers, they had been saying things like, "Damn that Ganoa!"

To Shelfa, it was contemptible.

Since long before she had always disliked him. Furthermore, it seemed recently whenever their gazes met, that he was looking at her with a dirty look in his eyes, adding fuel to the flames. The lady attendants hadn't been surprised when they heard Ganoa had betrayed them.

He seemed the type do such a thing anyway.

My Father couldn't see his true character.....

"Father....."

Sighing softly, Shelfa brought up her dead father's face in her mind.

But her memory was fuzzy, and she couldn't clearly remember. After all, her father had seldom tried to meet with her, and when he did, it tended to be about once a year.

On the occasions they did meet, she could only remember the hatred in her father's eyes. She hardly had any memories of them talking.

In all honesty, hearing of his death hadn't made her all that sad. *I might be a cold person...*Shelfa thought to herself, depressed.

I want to see Rain.....

Shelfa's heart was filled with that single wish. She was relieved that Rain was still alive for her.

Three years ago, Shelfa had been touched by Rain's kindness, and opened her heart to him.

Since that day Shelfa, who had always been by herself, was finally able to believe that she was no longer alone.

There wasn't a moment of that day she had forgotten.

She closed her eyes softly....and the memory she held so dear began...

☆——☆——☆

An expansive garden to the back of Galfort Castle was one of Shelfa's few 'favorite places.' Changing with the seasons, a large number of flowers colored their flowerbeds, and the limbs of an ancient jura tree streched out over the surface of a small pond.

Shelfa's only true joy was to draw pictures here all alone.

There was a ball being held that day, so her private tutor had let her go earlier than usual, and she was spending the time drawing what she liked much longer than usual.

Though it was late summer, still the sun shone brightly causing her eyes to squint as she walked through the garden to take a seat as always at the trunk of the great jura tree.

I wonder what I should draw today.....I've drawn the scenery here so many times already.....

Thinking of drawing a pretty bird, she cast around for one but counld't see any.

Momentarily at a loss, she finally settled on drawing a person.

Of course, she had no intention of having anyone in the castle be the model. For Shelfa, it was normal to be alone, and it was beyond difficult to have any kind of relationship with a stranger.

Furthermore, there wasn't really anybody she wanted to draw.

The only exception was her mother who had passed away three years ago, but it was painful to draw her so she put it aside.

In return, she decided to draw someone from her imagination. Actually, there was a man who had been appearing in Shelfa's dreams recently.

Bringing him to the forefront of her mind, she began drawing enthusiastically.

More than usual, her writing brush flew across the paper.

Yes, this is turning out well.....strange, it's almost as though my hand were moving naturally.....this is the first time...

After a while of being immersed in drawing, it seemed she heard a person's voice.

Abruptly her hand stopped moving.

It wasn't her imagination.

There was a voice. A singing voice.

Singing of the love between a man and a woman, a man was singing horribly out of tune. Even more, he was approaching where she was.
All of a sudden his singing grew softer. He may have realized someone was close by. Still, he

didn't quit singing and continued to grow closer.

If Shelfa had been her usual self, she would most likely have thought about how to hide herself right about now. She really disliked having to face others.

If it was just going to be bad anyway, it was much easier to run away beforehand.

But for some reason, she didn't feel like running this time.

She didn't know the reason.

It may have been that the singer was singing with a truly happy look on his face (though he was tone deaf), or it might have been that the effect of his low voice had mesmerised her. Thinking about it later, Shelfa still couldn't place what it was.

But what was certain, is that she had lost her chance to flee, and the problematic person had appeared from the other side of the flowerbed.

At first glance, Shelfa's sapphire blue eyes grew large.

"Yo!"

Stopping his good-mood singing, the man looked intently at Shelfa.

He wore a black shirt and black pants, even his eyes were black. He was covered in black from head to foot, and was also quite tall.

His face was finely chiseld and looked fearless, matching his sharp eyes. But for some reason in the depth of those eyes, the light of a childish prankster flickered.

She had never met him in person but...amazingly, this man was the spitting image of the drawing she had been making. He was the man she had been seeing in her dreams recently.

"Hmmm, this is quite unexpected. Hey little one, you're quite the beauty you know."

Not knowing what she was thinking, he spoke in a bright, light hearted manner.

'Little one' was most likely referring to her. It was the first time she had been called such, but strangely wasn't upset by it.

It may just have been because the word 'beauty' was thrown in.

There wasn't an ounce of that reserved feeling in his speech that she usually heard from others, it was a voice straight from the heart. That's why it wasn't upsetting.

"I go by Rain but, what about you?"

"You ask my...name?"
Shelfa had never thought she would be asked for her name, and for a moment was at a loss.

Now that she thought about it, how did this man even manage to get all the way in here?

Nobody without official business with the royal family should be able to get in.

"What's wrong? You can tell me your name, can't you?"

"Y, yes! Uhm, I am She——I mean, Michelle."

It was a name that had sprung up from somewhere in her heart.

For some reason, Shelfa couldn't bring herself to go by her real name. Thinking back, she may have already lost her heart to Rain by this time.

She didn't want to alienate Rain who she had only just met by acknowledging she was of the royal family of Sunkwoll.

Even though he had spoken so kindly to her, she didn't want that to break.

"Hooh, Michelle, huh. Hmm, It has a nice ring to it. It seems if the outside is pretty, the name must be too. Only.....that presence I felt a moment ago.....well, nevermind."

Rain thought for a moment, before nodding to himself. And as though gaining interest in Shelfa, he removed the scabbard holding his long sword from his waist, and squatted down.

"So, how old? About twelve, am I right? By the way, I'm twenty-two."

"I only just turned thirteen."

"I see, I see. It must be fate that we've met here. Let's get along, right little one?"

"Yes. Uhm...I agree."

"Alright. Then, what are doing in a place like this?"

That what she wanted to ask, but instead she held out the picture she had been drawing. Even when until now, she had never shown anyone a picture of them she had made.

"Eh.....this looks just like me. Hehh, at this rate you can eat with your pictures no problem. It's really good."

"What do you mean, 'you can eat with your pictures'...?"

"It means you can make a living. More importantly, have we met somewhere before? I don' think I could forget a face like yours though...?"

"Today is the first time we have met, Rain."

Replied Shelfa, explaining how she came here to draw often, how only today she had decided to draw someone, and how it had turned out to look just like him.

.....Because it was embarrasing, she didn't tell him about having already seen him in her dreams.

After listening to Shelfa, Rain tilted his head.

"What a coincidence, that is. It really looks just like me."

"Yes.....it's quite a mystery."

"Hmmm."

Rain suddenly looked up at the sky, thinking deeply about something.

After a while, Rain spoke in a very serious tone.....

"Perhaps, this may be destiny."

"Destiny?"

"Yeah, destiny. Des-tin-y. You and I may not have just an ordinary relationship in the future."

"W, what do you mean by not just an ordinary relationship...?"

"In otherwords, someone you think of fondly, or a lover. Something like that."

He didn't seem to be joking.

Shelfa turned bright red. There was the content of the words, but what was more upsetting for he was the fact that she felt it wouldn't be bad at all...

Even though she had only just met him.

"What's with such a sour look? You're not worried about the gap between us because you're a noble, are you?"

"Eh! H, how did you know I was nobility?"

"You know, you do have blond hair and blue eyes, the symbol of nobility for this country. Especially your eyes which are blue even to the sclera, they really stand out."

"Ah, I see..."

"Okay putting that aside.....You don't like that it's me? I guess you think so too, that status is everything. You scorn the commoners, don't you?"

"Not at all! No way.....In reality I really dislike the nobility....."

Shelfa turned down her head, looking sad.

It was how she really felt.

She knew how her father only saw her as a tool for his convinience. When she is a little older she would become wife to a prince of some other country, just a tool.

Nothing more. That was the reason she couldn't do as she pleased.

After her mother had died, her father had grown even colder.

"Hey, Michelle."

All of a sudden Rain's hands pressed gently on either side of her face.

"Ah."

"A kid can't make a face like that."

"Sir Rain...?"

"You can leave it at just 'Rain.' What I mean is, stop making such a face. Alright?"

Rain asked softly.

Her cheeks being rubbed by such large hands——

The warmth that spread out from that touch seemed to seep all the way into the depths of her heart.

It was the first time someone had talked to her in such a manner since her mother's death.

Shelfa's eyes brimmed with tears.

Forcing her lips to cease trembling, Shelfa instead asked something she had been wondering about for a while.

"Rain.....why are you here?"

"Right. I'm a centurion. In the last battle I did a few things and would you believe it, little one? In return I get invited to a ball. Jeez, if they're going to do all that, they might as well raise my status a little, right? I can't go along with them."

"Oh, so then you slipped out and ended up coming here?"

Shelfa nodded. At the same time, she realized he was a skilled knight.

After all, her father who was so uptight about pure-blooded nobility, had let this commoner who wasn't a noble command a military unit.
The next moment, Rain's hand came to rest atop Shelfa's head.

"And what about you?"

"M, me? I always come here to draw....."

"Hmmm."

Rain scrunched up his face in concentration, looking intently at Shelfa.

Perhaps he had figured out her status...Shelfa thought in pained silence.

She was wrapped in uncertainty.....But what Rain pointed out was something entirely different.

"In other words, you're always by yourself?"

"Yes...I like it best when I can be alone."

To her response, Rain put force behind his next words.

"That's no good! Sometimes it may be good to be alone, but not all the time!"

"Is that.....so..."

"Of course it is. All right! It's a good thing I'm here today."

Rain stood up in a burst of movement, extending his had to Shelfa.

"Personally, compared to some ball, a candidate for my future wife is much more important. If possible, I would like to have met you ten years from now though..."

Rain smiled brightly. All of a sudden her candidate status had been boosted from that of lover, to wife. At a loss, Shelfa looked up silently at Rain.

"Don't get it? I'm saying let's play together. Even though I look like this, when I was a kid I was called the 'castle of fun.'"

"In other words, you are inviting me?"

"Is there anyone else here? Come on!"

"But I'm....."

Automatically trying to refuse, Shelfa drew in a deep breath without thinking.

This man, what black, deep eyes he has.....You could almost pass through them. And he looks so gently at me.....It's, it's.....deeper even than my late mother's.

Being gazed at so, it made her feel as though she were melting, just as the snow does under

the sun.

"Do I have.....your permission?"

Instead of refusing, Shelfa asked in a small voice,

".....You're really inviting someone such as myself?"

"Sure. You don't like it?"

"Not at all, Sir Rain. I mean, Rain. I put myself in your care."

Shelfa put on a brightly shining smile, one she thought she had forgotten how to make, taking hold of the hand held out to her.

☆——☆——☆

It was hard to believe three years had already passed since then.

She could still remember it as though it were only yesterday.

This same place, that day.

At noon they ate the bread Rain had brought with him, and he stayed with her until evening.

The games he had introduced to her were those played by small boys, but for Shelfa it was still plenty enjoyable.

Looking at Rain's sunny smile, with only him occasionally gently rubbing her head, there was nothing else she could wish for.

Whenever she would jump, those black eyes always watched over her deeply and intently.

When she would fall over from playing, that large, warm hand held out to her.

Shelfa wished this time could continue forever.

But the joyful time didn't last. As the sun sank it became time for Rain to take his leave.

"I've got to be getting back soon."

Those words caused Shelfa to stand as still as ice.

From tomorrow she would be alone again.....that truth pushed cruelly at her heart.

But that wasn't all. Shelfa had come to realize it.

That she had fallen in love with Rain.
To forever be by his side, she wanted to always see his smile. If possible, she wanted him to

embrass her warmly.

That's why she made the request.

"Please, take me with you!"

"Now now, Michelle."

"I have no wish to remain here! I don't want to be alone anymore. Rain.....I want to leave together with Rain!"

"Even if you say that...You're asking me to leave and go on a journey with a child."

Rain had on a troubled expression.

But, as though his heart was moved as he watched Shelfa, he nodded, and began to think. The fact that she was making a crazy wish, she knew it quite well.

Only, her feelings towards Rain were true, and that wish was truly that.

Shelfa was courting him with pure emotions. To the extent that she was willing to leave everything to follow after him.

"I understand. Then let's do this."

Coming to his decision, Rain stood up, searching his pockets. What he pulled out, was an old silver coin that had been turned into a pendant, with a chain attached.

"Here, I'll give you this."

???

From what she could see, a language she couldn't read was engraved on the surface of the coin.

The coin itself was quite old, as its faded color showed.

"What does it say, those letters?"

"Well you see, this is a magical item and on it is written, 'To bring me before that person.' It's a relic from a kingdom that has long, long since been destroyed. A time before the Magi were all eradicated in the Holy Wars. It's true."

"This is.....?"

Shelfa looked at the coin admiringly. It wasn't as though magic had completely disappeared, but the current state couldn't even be compared with the that of the past.

It was very rare to come across any weapons embued with semipermanent magic, and even if

there was one it's price would be astronomical.

"When I was travelling to the north of the continent, I found this in some ancient ruins.....It's true! I only have two but, I'll give this one to you."

Putting great emphasis behind his words, Rain brought his hands around Shelfa's thin neck, and attaching the necklace for her.

Finishing, Rain rested both his hands on her shoulders and peered into her eyes.

"Listen closely, Michelle. Right now there are things I need to do. That's why, I can't take you with me right now."

At that moment Shelfa opened her mouth to speak, but Rain stopped here with his gaze, continuing.

"After five years, just another five years I need you to wait. At that time my mind will be settled——No...at that time my work will be finished, and you will have grown up. That's why, wait until this day five years from now. If you haven't changed your mind by then, I will take you wherever you wish to go."

"Rain....."

Oh, how much she wanted to protest...

If possible, she wanted to tell him five years was impossible.

But she knew what Rain said was right. He had said he had things to do, but it would also be impossible for him to bring along such a small child as herself.

In the end, Shelfa tried hard to keep her expression from wavering.
She had decided to trust in, and wait for Rain. She intended to nod smilling, and she managed to do so.

Though to the greatly more grown up Rain, her actions were transparent.

Smiling, he patted her head.

"Don't make such a sad face, didn't I already tell you?"

Rain said in a soft voice.

"That's why I've given you this coin. It can only be used once, so only if something happens and you can no longer wait any longer, you can use it then. It's easy to use. Grip the coin tightly, and as you think of my face, shout my name as loud as you can. If you do——"

"If I do?"

Shelfa was wrapped in anticipation.

"——The magic will take over, and no matter where I am you will be by my side in an instant. It is completely, totally the truth."

Rain reaffirmed.

Letting out a soft sigh, Shelfa tightly held the coin at her breast.

If I have this I can see Rain whenever I want. Whenever, wherever.

"Ahh, Michelle. You seem like you're ready to use it right now, but you should definitely save it for the right time."

At that Rain turned around, and gave his finally warning to Shelfa.

"There's such a thing as conveniece for me too. Apart from when I finish the things I need to do, if I'm getting along well with some girl and you come dropping in from above, it would be quite the situation!"

"No....."

Shelfa's heart beat painfully.

Even if she didn't understand the full meaning, the part about 'some girl' was still enough to hurt.

It was proof she had fallen completely for him.

"But I understand, Rain. The reason you gave me this coin, was so it would be my comfort, am I right?"

"As expected, you're very sharp, little one. The trump card should always be saved for last".

Rain laughed contentedly, nodding.

"Since it's you, I believe you can wait. Five years will be over before you know it."

".....Yes."

Just maybe she could wait that long.

As long as she had this coin.

Rain looked at Shelfa holding firmly to the coin, and with a warm smile locked eyes with her.

"Little one. Today, you have really left a deep mark on me. So in return, I will tell you a secret of mine. Are you ready?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Alright. Then this is only for your ears."

Rain's voice lowered.

"Actually, there is nothing in this world that scares me. Do you know why?"

"Is it because of your bravery?"

"Nope. Nothing great like that. Due to something that happened a long time ago, my ability to feel fear itself was burned away. Probably."

At that, Rain swallowed deeply before beginning the story.

"You know I, a long time ago.....i, in my home village....."

Something unbelievable happened.

Rain's black eyes began to shake, and in their depths the shadow of what could only be described as fear was plainly visible.

His shaking lips cut off the strange laugh, as the color drained from his face.

For some reason she didn't know, A horrible conflict was waging in the depths of Rain's heart, and fear began to take hold.

That Rain could be so afraid!

The moment she thought such, Shelfa stretched out her hand.

"Please, wait."

Rain's face showed his relief.

Shelfa tightly gripped Rain's hand, and in a firm voice spoke.

".....Rain, you seem to be in such pain, such saddness.....so I don't want to hear it now. If you are able to tell me one day——then I will wait for that time."

Rain's cheek shook slightly, as he exhaled, relieved. After leaving his cheek in Shelfa's hand for a moment, He slowly pulled himself away.

"Jeez.....You're truly a softy, Michelle. Not good, I feel like I could really fall for you in the future."

Letting go of her hand, Rain stood up.

His mouth had changed into his standard fearless smile.
"I'll be leaving soon, little one. I will definitely keep my promise."

"Those last words were unnecessary. After all, I trust in you, Rain. Today five years from now, I will be waiting here for you."

Forcing herself to smile, Shelfa looked up at Rain.

Giving a broad smile in return, Rain lifted one hand into the air, turning his back to her.

His darkly clad visage did not once turn back, and melted into the growing darkness. Even after he had completely disappeared from her view, Shelfa didn't move from that spot for a long time.

——Rain. One day please tell me what you were about to. I will always be waiting. Always.

☆——☆——☆

A long time had passed since she and Rain had separated.

It had been a long, long three years.

How many times have I regretted staying...

Why hadn't she tried harder to leave with him.....Furthermore, why had she lied about her name?

Leaning up against the tree, Shelfa looked at the still surface of the lake.

She had lied about her name to keep Rain from disliking her, but now she was regretting her decision. Yet surely Rain would laugh and forgive her the next time they met.

The next time.....just when would that be.

The desire to see Rain engulfed her. The need to see his smiling face once again was almost unbearable.

No matter what, it was no longer possible for her to keep waiting.

Galfort Castle was now empty of all she could call friends, and all that awaited the castle was to see the Zarmine army come.

Since the morning, Shelfa hadn't seen any of her servents or attendants.

Most likely they had already fled.

It felt as though she had become all but forgotten. As though it had always been this way, ever since her mother had passed away.

"Rain....."
Pulling out the pendant she wore at her bosom, Shelfa gently stroked its faded surface.

If she only called his name, using the last charge of the ancient magic imbued in the coin, she could go to Rain at any moment.

This old silver coin has been all that has kept me going ever since I parted with Rain.

She gazed for a long time at the coin.

If she were to use it right now——

Unconciously she just about called his name in a loud voice. With only that she could go to his side.

Only——As Shelfa had done ever since receiving it, she again carefully lowered the coin back to her breast.

"If I remember right, Rain told me a trump card should always be saved for last. I will prove faithful."

Shelfa voiced, as though to reassure herself. She slowly broke away from the tree.

Gazing around at the garden, she tried to burn it into her memory so she would never forget this scenery.

The flowerbed where beautiful flowers bloomed, the still, reflective lake and at last the great, light brown tree with its giant branches.

At long last, the time for action had finally come. I may never return to this place.

Even so, Shelfa turned her back on the resting grounds. If she could meet Rain again, no matter the sacrifice, she would have no regrets.

"Now if only there was still a horse left in the stables that could carry me."

By horse, it would take two days continuing through day and night without stopping to reach Cortecleas Castle.

She would need to pack clothes that would make movement easy.....with the exception of an outfit for her reunion with Rain.

Returning to her private chambers, she prepared the basics before hurrying out into the corridor.

——It was at that same moment, that a girl of similar age came walking towards her with a vacant expression on her face.

Her black hair was decorated with an alice band. She was a maid who worked in the castle. She walked in a somewhat defeated manner——but the moment she saw Shelfa, that

defeated shuffling turned to relief.

"P, Princess.....Thank goodness, you're still here."

"Liera.....? What are you doing at this time?"

It wasn't as though they were particularly close, but Liera was the only one she had been able to talk to normally.

Shelfa had always thought of her as always being more composed than herself, but right now she seemed on the verge of tears.

"I, I've no idea what I should do.....All the head maids that gave orders until yesterday seem to have all dissapeared. ...Uhm, the rumor about losing the battle, it seems it was true?"

It seemed that even though the rumor had spread, it still hadn't managed to reach all the maids.

Shelfa put on a firm but calm expression before nodding.

".....Yes, it is so."

"——! No way..."

Liera's face lost some of its color.

For this girl who shared the castle for her living quarters, it wasn't easy to accept.

Just then, the sound of running feet from the other side of the hallway could be heard. Running in the castle was practically unheard of——

They exchanged shocked looks...and it was Shelfa who responded first.

She quickly opened an attendants room door that was right before them.

"Hurry, in here!"

Grabbing her hand, Shelfa pulled her inside.

She almost let out a scream of fear, but Shelfa stifled it by hugging her close.

——After a few seconds, the footsteps stopped before Shelfa's private chambers. There was the sound of the door being opened without any kind of reserve. ——Directly after, voices muttering to each other were audiable. They were familiar.....the voices belonged to some head attendants whose faces she knew.

"Hey, there's no one here!"

"That's not possible.....that timid princess, there's no place for her to go alone, right?"

The two girls pressed close together exchanged a look.

Holding onto each other so, Liera's quivering passed on to Shelfa.

Trying to comfort her, Shelfa gently patted her back.

In reality, it was she who was frightened. But right now, she was determined.

No matter what I must get out of here!

"Well right now...we've got to hurry up and secure her."

"Yeah. When the enemies——I mean Zarmine army gets here, if we don't have her in hand, we're the ones in trouble."

"If you get it, then keep searching!"

The voice faded out as it grew further away.

Separating themselves, Shelfa let out a deep breath.
Her breath had caught once she knew they were searching for her.

"What.....people!"

Liera's tone sounded harsh.

"They are planning on handing you over, Princess!"

"It would seem so."

Shelfa smiled sadly.

"In exchange for that achievement, they must be hoping to receive a decent post with the enemy."

"Princess, doesn't that make your stomach turn?!"

Unable to respond, Shelfa could only gaze back at Liera.

"Liera, it would be best if you left here soon too.....where is your home village?"

"Eh? Uhm, farther south.....Ahh! T, this country might end!"

Liera began shaking again.

It had taken a while, but it seemed she had finally grasped the situation.

"If it's south, then that's perfect. I was just about to head that way.....If you're alright with it,

may I see you some of the way?"

Speaking as calmly as she could, she rested a hand softly on Liera's shoulder.

Her shaking ceased. She stared fixedly at Shelfa in a way she never had before.

Awed, she spoke.

"Princess, you're very calm."

For the first time Shelfa looked down.

She responded in a small voice.

"I won't die until I see Rain again."

"……eh?"

"N, nothing! Instead, we need to hurry up and get away from here…alright?"

Just as Rain had done for her long ago, Shelfa extended her hand.

A little while later, two soldiers guarding the gate saw Princess Shelfa.

Because it was their duty, they made an effort to try and stop Shelfa and the maid riding fast on a horse together. They had been ordered to stop the Princess from leaving at all costs. No matter how they saw it, the one charging towards them was none other than the Princess. Only…

White riding pants and a simple tunic, as well as a plain cloak…it was the first time in her life Shelfa was wearing such clothes. As the two moved to try and block the road, she yelled out.

"Please move aside!!"

Hit with the force from her voice, the two jumped aside without thinking.

It was only a moment before the horse passed between them.

They followed the bobbing golden hair with their gaze, dumbstruck.

This day, Shelfa had, for the first time ever, decided her own fate, leaving the castle she had been locked in behind her.

Chapter 4: Reunion

Sunlight shone over Leni's head, but as it was closing in upon the winter season the air was hardly warm.

To the contrary, it was quite chilly.

Leni was being relentlessly assailed by the cold wind as he sat on a bench in the castle courtyard. From the branches of the trees planted within the castle walls, red-tinted leaves fluttered down.

It's really cold. But, like what happened a few days ago, Yuri might come by.

Wavering between seeking shelter in the castle or continuing to wait outside, Leni had no idea when she might come. No matter what, he had no intention of giving up the possibility of having lunch together with Yuri.

She had finally started to show some interest in him and his swordsmanship, so the real battle would be from here on out. *Just a little longer, a little longer!*

.....Leni hadn't even paused to consider the possibility that, when Yuri had come to watch practice a few days ago, it may have only been a coincidence.

As though making fun of his tragic condition, a gust of icy wind slammed into him. His fingers gripping the sandwich were nearly frozen stiff, but as a man he continued to bear it.

"Well, it really is rather peaceful."

Leni said, letting out a slow sigh.

Currently, under Rain's orders they were preparing their marching formations, but there weren't any detailed instructions as of yet. Unlike the knights or trainees of lower status, captains like Leni really weren't that busy. It wasn't like they had nothing to do, but a break was a necessity.
In other words, nothing differed from the usual. Even if the leader of the country had died, and a vast majority of their allies had fallen. Well, Xenoa was making enough of a scene for all of them though.

At any rate...just how is the general's head put together, I wonder...?

Four days earlier in the evening, the two aides Leni and Xenoa had been called to Rain's room. His face always seemed to be younger that theirs. With a wide smile, Rain had given them some information.

"Today, I've received a report through Magic Vision about the current situation with Zarmine's expedition."

He really was beaming. All around, he seemed to be in a great mood. The color of his face was healthy and looked well. Then again, it always did...

What, have you finished defying the majority that say this war is decided with your 'Surprising-Turn-Around-Victory' strategy!? Have you already defeated Zarmine!?

Believing Rain would saying something along those lines, Leni broke into a ridiculous smile. Naturally, anyone that saw the general's expression at such a time would think so. It's not like he had thought of something anyone else wouldn't have...

By the way——the truth was far from what he had imagined.

The opposing expedition had nearly decimated every unit save Ralphus's. Due to the betrayal of Ganoa and Gilles, King Douglas had died in battle...

Leni felt his legs turn to rubber. He was stunned that Rain could laugh so in the midst of such a situation. Even before Rain had become a Knight five years previously, Leni had fought under him when they had been mercenaries. This was one aspect of Rain he never had been able to fathom.

Just remembering his own pale and shaking expression, and Xenoa waving her sword around in one of those violent outbursts of hers, caused his head to ache.

"Well, what's done is done."

Dropping his gaze to his lunchbox which was by now half empty, he put the lid back on with lingering affection before reaching his hands up and stretching his muscles.

In the end, he had never met the King before, and the always gentle Ralphus had been saved, so it wasn't really all that bad, he thought.

The one I serve has always been the general after all.

Yes...While Douglas had been the King of the country, he was not Leni's lord. The only one he would follow was Rain.

And the fact that he hadn't left Ralphus for dead, made Leni really glad.

"Ah, commanding officer~!"

A voice that sounded relieved caused Leni to pause as he was getting ready to leave.

When he looked back, a man who appeared to still be in his teens came jogging up towards him from the direction of the castle's gate. If he remembered correctly, the youth was a Knight trainee in his unit. Leni couldn't remember his name, but there was no mistaking him.

"Has something happened?"

"Ah, yes. Actually, I'm not sure what I should do."

"What about?"

"I'm on duty for guarding the gate today, but just a moment ago, someone who looks like a noble I've never seen before came asking to meet with Rain. I was trying to figure out what to do.....they're not even giving me their name."

As expected of a gate guard, he saluted in form and hand while wearing his armor.

Nodding as he listened intently he wondered to himself why, whenever something happens, everybody came to him.
Xenoa's somewhere nearby, so why me? I wanted to get some rest too.

"It goes without saying but, we can't let them in."

Without letting out his previous thoughts, Leni responded crisply which was rare for him.

"We're in a time of war after all. Even if the appearance is that of a noble, we have no way of telling what kind of person they are. I'm always saying it, aren't I? No suspicious people are to be let in."

"Yes.....of course."

For some reason this youth seemed to be rather disappointed.

He glanced once more at Leni as though hoping for some compromise, before reluctantly doing an about-face.

Leni hardened his heart, keeping himself from calling out to stop him.

After all, they were in the middle of a war.

There was simply no way they could let anyone into the castle who wouldn't even give their name.

Even when things were slow, decicions had to upheld.

Sighing, the youth let out a stream of words as he walked away.

"And she was such a beauty, too. It's too bad."

"Wait a minute, you!"

Loudly calling out for him to stop, Leni sprinted to catch up with the youth who was walking away.

It was a response with no delay.

"My intuition tells me that I should at least meet with this person. Yep, I'll head over there right away."

With that, Leni left the guard behind. The lunchbox was also left on the bench.

He heard the guard stutter, but ignored it and hurried on.

"N, no fair! Getting ahead like that, Captain Leni!"

Hearing the voice call out to him from behind, Leni quickened his pace even more.

Right before the castle gate, an angel stood waiting.

It was a ridiculous expression to use, but that was how Leni felt. That was how beautiful this girl was.

She looked to be around fourteen to sixteen.

Long, straight and shining gold tresses fell to about her waist. Her sparkling eyes were a light blue that grew deeper in gradation closer to the center of the eye. No matter how you looked at her, she was undoubtedly a noble of Sunkwoll.

Gentle features——with an amazingly stunning face turned up upon Leni's approaching footsteps, before showing a look of complete disappointment and once again dropping to the ground.

Unusual for the nobility, she had a rather reserved personality.

"All of you, you're scaring the lady! Don't stare so much!"

For now, Leni gave the order to the youth who had called him a moment before, and to the other slightly older guard who had remained at his post. After all, they had been staring at her with mouths agape.

The two guards reluctantly moved their gazes away from the girl.

As a man he knew how much they wanted to look. Even so, he wouldn't change his orders.

Yet Leni himself continued to stare at the angelic girl, as though he were boring a hole right through her.

"Well now, miss. If you have any business here, let me hear you out."

".....Uhm. I, I am....."

The angel lifter her face ever so slightly, and when she met the burning gaze Leni was pouring towards her, she again looked down.

"What is it? You don't have to hold back, just come out and say whatever it is. I am General Rain's aide, Leni——ah, hey!"

It was sudden and unexpected.

The beautiful girl who had been so timid a moment ago, strode quickly up to Leni.

She came so close to bumping into him, that his nostrils were filled with the sweet scent of perfume.

"Rain's aide! In that case, please let me meet with him!"

Her perfectly clear blue eyes shone brightly as she looked up at Leni.

It seemed she wasn't just a quiet girl after all.

"W, whaaaaa?"

She nodded vigorously several times. He was taken aback, and felt completely at her command.
At that moment he noticed the glare of the two gate guards.

Leni quickly returned to himself.

That's right. Just a while ago he had been stressing 'You can't let anyone into the castle!' It was dangerous to change the rules because of the sweetness of some girl. Beyond dangerous. It would lead to problems in authority and structure with his men.

"Ahh...Ahem."

Feeling the eyes of his men on him, Leni purposefully took a few steps back. After he had regained his composure from the attack of this girl who was now all smiles, he spoke.

"Well, according to the circumstance it's not like I can't bring you to the General, but at the very least I'd like to know your name and business."

At that, her face shadowed over. It seemed there was some kind of complicated circumstance which existed beneath that countenance.

Even so, it was something he had to ask, so he waited silently for an answer. Time crept by until, at long last, with a troubled expression the girl opened her pale-pink lips.

"……My name is Shelfa."

"Shelfa? Hmmm, I feel like I've heard that name somewhere before."

Leni's memory snagged on something. It was definitely a name he had heard before. As though struggling with the same thoughts, the two guards tilted their heads.

Different from Leni, she was a noble of pure blood, and her eyes were entirely blue. There was no white part. By some chance, perhaps she was a famous person?

"You are unmistakably a noble……furthurmore from a prestigious house, right? What's your full

name?"

The silence that followed this inquiry was much longer than the last.

The three cast nervous glances between them as they waited, until at last she slowly started to give her name."

"My full name is——"

"Yeah, your full name is?"

"……Shelfa Iras Sunkwoll."

"Shelfa Iras Sunkwoll……Sunkwoll……So....EEHHH!?"

Repeating it faithfully, Leni broke out in a loud voice, shocked.

After all, there were only a few people whose name included that of the Kingdom.

At long last realizing who this mysterious beauty was, the three literally jumped at this revelation.
What a predicament! Leni felt sweat on his brow. *What a beauty! Wait...that's not it! I've got to tell the General right away!*

"General! GE~NER~AL!"

Without any warning the door to Rain's chambers opened, and Leni appeared, his eyes round as saucers.

Rain lifted his gaze from the drawn map atop the table, letting out a heavy sigh.

"...It seems everyone wants to barge in here today. I'm finally in the mood to come up with a plan, so don't bother me. Besides, this isn't some cheap inn. This room is the most important personal quarters of the entire castle, so at least knock, would you?"

"Let's leave that for later! Something big has happened! Something so big everything else pales in comparison!"

"You don't need to keep repeating yourself. Just spit it out already."

"Alright. I'll tell you, so I hope your ready."

Taking a deep breath, Leni spoke in a dramatic tone.

"She's here at the castle! The Princess! I was so surprised!"

"Your voice is too loud, this isn't a rally, you know!"

Rain cried out in a loud voice, standing up in his aggravation.

Well, so she came on her own.

"...You don't seem all that surprised?"

Leni asked him dutifully.

"Well that's obvious, isn't it. I received a letter from Ralphus 'kindly requesting' that I take care of the Princess, so wouldn't it make sense that he gave her some sort of instructions? For example, if anything happens she should come to my place. Well, now that she's here, I guess it can't be helped."

"S, so quickly...She is quite the beauty, the Princess. A little more like..."

"You liar."

Rain cut him off, laughing.

"You really think a beauty could be born from that sweaty old geezer?"

"Hah! You jest! W, well it's okay. Only, what I said is true. Like you, General, I was sceptical at first, but when I came to see her..."

"Alright, I get it, I get it. In that case, you can take care of her. That should satisfy you, right?"

"Eh!? Can I really? Ya-hoo! Ah! Wait a moment. Even if I wanted to, she's quite adamant about meeting with you in person though."

"With me? Why?"

"I've not the faintest! She acted as though she already knew you though."

Leni's envious gaze bored intently into Rain.

He was easy to read. Even though Yuri seemed to have caught his eye, he was still going to chase after this Princess.

"How would I know her, a Princess. There has to be some misunderstanding somewhere."

"It didn't seem that way. It really felt that she has some pressing reason for seeing you."

"Even if you say so, there's nothing I can do if I haven't a clue. Anyway, it's not as though I could turn down the request of the Princess if she wants to meet me so."

In a bad mood, Rain proceeded to leave his quarters.

Well, for the sake of argument there was nothing wrong with going to meet her.

As though Rain's attitude made him angry, Leni put a lot of force into his next words.

"When you meet her you'll be just as surprised by her beauty."

"You really think so~? Want to make a bet of it?"

"That sounds great! If you meet the Princess and can say she isn't incredibly pretty, then I'll run naked around the castle grounds one-hundred times, backwards!"

Rain couldn't help but be taken aback at this.

For Leni who was weak-willed and lacked confidence, yet boasted no arch-enemies to date...

It might be best if he did meet with her.

Firming up his resolve Rain increased his pace and walked out into the hallway.

If I meet with her and she looks like King Douglas, I'll have you do exactly as you promised!

As he continued in the direction of the guest chamber on the first floor, a blonde haired beauty came walking towards him. She was wearing a violet tunic that fell to her waist, and a matching pair of trousers.

Unfortunately, it was Xenoa. He could feel a scolding coming on.

"General!"

Upon seeing him, she came running up to him.

All of a sudden her face grew angry, and her prettiness was ruined.....It was always the same.

"I met you at just the right time. There's something important I have to tell you."

"Starting with that right off the batt, are you.....Sorry but I don't have time just now. Some troublesome person's requested my presence."

Rain responded with a serious expression and tone. It goes without saying he didn't stop moving either.

But Xenoa wasn't one to give up at just that, as she fell in step with him.

"Who is this person?"

"Apparently it's the Princess. Amazing, isn't it?"

Leni responded in Rain's stead, happily.

.....It isn't that important, but this isn't some kid's boasting contest!

"Wha!? T, the Princess!?"

Seeming to grow a little pale, Xenoa put a hand on the wall to steady herself. She placed a hand on her forhead, and with a stunned expression lifter her gaze to the ceiling. It was such an overly dramatic reaction, it would cause one to think she were doing it on purpose.

"W, when did she arrive..."

"Well, just a moment ago, really..."

As Leni was explaining the events to Xenoa, Rain left them behind and continued on.

If he continued to hang around Xenoa, her nagging would become incessant, and he couldn't handle it. But as he anticipated, he heard the sound of hurried footsteps as Xenoa again lined up beside him. Followed by...nagging.

"Why didn't you talk to me about such an important thing?"

"My word! I've only just heard of it myself! If you're going to complain, tell it to Leni!"

"General! What a thing to say!"

Leni's voice was raised almost to a shout.

"Any way. I'll accompany you."

Glaring at Leni, Xenoa said heatedly.

Fed up, Rain stopped walking.

"Do as you like. We've arrived after all."

Just when he lifted his arm to knock on the solid iron reinforced door....he felt a cold shiver.

Pressure.

Rain's sixth sence, forged from countless battles, was warning him of something dangerous.

The one in this room was dangerous.

A tingling feeling in his neck told him that it was someone, perhaps an enemy, that he had met before.

What is this? The one inside should be the Princess. Then why, this force.....it feels as though whoever is in there could be equal to myself...No, perhaps even beyond that.

That wasn't all.

This isn't the first time I've had this feeling. I've met someone somewhere before who gave off

this same type of pressure. I'd forgotten, but I believe it was.....

"General, what's the matter? You've frozen solid."

Leni's peaceful voice drew him from his contemplations.

Rain slowly lowered his raised hand.

"Hey, Leni.....Xenoa, you too. I'd like to ask just in case but, do you know if the Princess is skilled in swordsmanship or physical combat? Or perhaps magic or something else?"

"Hah?"

Leni tilted his head to the side, and Xenoa's face showed she didn't understand the question.

Tired of waiting, Rain interjected.

"In other words, is she strong is what I'm trying to figure out."

The two aides traded glances that showed they were on the same page.

After a small pause, Xenoa spoke.

"The Princess has always been kept within the Palace grounds. I've heard she is learned and has studied manners, but I don't believe she ever learned swordsmanship or magic."

"Hmm..."

But still, there was no mistaking this feeling.

He was still feeling the pressure. Rain never doubted his sixth sense. It was because of it that he had been able to live through till today, after all.

"Well, whatever."

He would know upon entering.

There is nothing that I fear, no matter the opponent. So let's just have a look, shall we.

Rain put strength into his hand, lifting it to knock against the door.

As he entered the room, he eyes rested on a young girl with long golden hair who turned around quickly.

The girl who had been staring at the scenery outside the window looked directly at Rain, and only Rain, with her large blue eyes.

Woah now...Rain couldn't say a word.

He was stunned by how beautiful the girl looked in the frilled, pure white clothing she was wearing.
Just a moment. How in the world could that ugly old geezer whose feet stank to high heaven, have a girl this beautiful? Not one part of her looks like him?

Furthermore...

He knit his brow.

He definitely felt like he had seen this girl before.

The pressure lifting, Rain looked intently at every corner of the girls face.

".....Rain."

All of a sudden, tears began welling up from the depths of her eyes.

Stretching out her shaking hands, she walked towards him with both tears in her eyes and a smile on her face.

"Eh? Ahhh~! Are you the Princess?"

Rain's question full of uncertainty on how to react, didn't even enter the girl's ears.

"I've wanted to see you.....Always, always I have been waiting for you. Rain.....I'm so happy....so happy. Finally...finally we can meet."

One step at a time the girl approached him, at last running and throwing herself into him. Her warm body pressed against him.

Now it was Leni and Xenoa's turn to freeze in place.

Especially Leni, his hands were outstretched ready to hug something, while his face showed the expression of a kid who had just had his favorite candy stolen away.

"----Rain!"

It was the Princess who had called his name.

"W, wait a second! Princess, you seem to have the wrong person..."

Saying such, he firmly wound his arm around her waist. He felt rather good at the moment.

"Rain, do you not remember? It's me. You played with me three years ago....."

The girl finally broke into a great smile, and gazed up at him.

Three years ago.....As he heard it, his memories at last came to the front. The girl he had met in

the garden where trespassers weren't allowed. Her beautiful yet lonely face, and the promise they had made...

The image of the girl from his memories ovelapped the figure of the girl before him.

"Aah~! You're that kid from that time!"

Without thinking Rain spoke in a loud voice.

"Yes! Oh, you remember me then!"

"Of course! But for me to completely mistake you. In only three years, you have really bloomed into a wonderful woman. I couldn't figure it out right away."

With the intention of welcoming her warmly, Rain hugged her tightly to his chest. In return, she squeezed her arms, wound around his back, tightly.

Oh! Her flat chest also seems to have expaned quite well-----

"...General."

The soft voice interjected his moment of bliss. With a fixed gaze Xenoa glared at Rain. Her hand rested on the sword at her waist.

Why she was wearing a sword in the castle was a mystery to him.

"May I ask about the circumstances?"

"You know, I'm sensing a really unpleasant aura from you."

"The circumstances!"

Her hand gripping the handle shook.

She was someone who snapped easily.

A bit regretfully, Rain removed his arm from around Michelle.

"Calm down and I'll tell you. This child is an aquantance of mine, and her name is Michelle."

"E, eh? She's not the Princess?"

Leni said, finally breaking free from his petrification.

"Ah, no no. Well, I can understand the reason. Michelle tried to meet with me, but since she wasn't let into the castle, she had no choice but to use the Princess's name."

"Uhm, well..."

Michelle timidly tried to interject with upturned eyes.

Rain waved his hand in the air, signaling her not to worry.

"It's nothing to worry about, Michelle. If one of those men over there tried it I'd blast them away, but you're special. You've no reason to feel upset."

"N, no, it's just..."

"I said it's no big deal. A sinless prank now and then, its nothing. When I was young, I was called the Emperor of Pranks."

"That's not it!"

Michelle raised her voice suddenly.

She realigned her expression, looking very serious indeed.

"I have lied to you, Rain."

"......Eh?"

"Please let me give you my real name. I am Shelfa Iras Sunkwoll.....the daughter of King Douglas...I'm terribly sorry, Rain. I have been lying to you since the beginning."

Rain's mind went completely blank.

After a short while of staring at her in a daze,

"...What'd you say?"

The mood in the room grew ever heavier.

☆——☆——☆

He was dreaming.

It was a dream where he crossed swords with a man who's silver hair was long enough to cover one eye.He was closing in on Rain who had never been defeated since leaving his hometown, and trying to bring their battle to a conclusion.

Impossible!

He thought within his dream.

Is such a thing even possible? For me to be cornered so--

I must become the best. I can't allow defeat, no matter the opponent! Never again will I---
Ignoring Rain's edginess, the man with the silver hair swung his gleaming magical sword,

closing down on Rain. The scarlet aura of the blade filled Rain's field of vision, before he was cut to pieces.

"—Ahk!"

Rain awoke in a pool of sweat.

He was atop his bed in the same room as always, with the morning sun streaming in through the window.

After recalling the nightmare he'd just had, Rain slowly shook his head before getting out of his bed. --A dream is a dream. There is no way I could lose.

Nodding decisively, he headed to his wardrobe. He changed into his usual black shirt and black pants, yawning lightly. He had finally regained his composure.

...Tomorrow we are moving out after all. Maybe today I'll just take it easy. I did just have a strange dream after all. Perhaps I was getting tired without realizing it.

This was actually the day the lord of a castle was busiest, but Rain, who disliked troublesome tasks, decided to hurry up and head out before he was discovered by Xenoa.

He was already feeding misleading information to Zarmine through Günter. Due to differing instructions coming in from their home country, they should be immobile at the moment. If things went well, they would meet them at the border.

Thinking about the plan and battle to come, Rain finished changing and put on his magical sword that was leaning against the wall.

"Alright, I don't think anyone is watching."

After checking once again, Rain lept out from his window.

Twirling several times in the air, Rain landed catlike upon the ground from a height of six floors which would have killed any ordinary man.

"Now, how about an easy long-distance ride...ah!"

At the end of Rain's gaze, stood a young boy with his eyes wide open.

Rain didn't know it, but he was the same guard that had met Shelfa at the gate the previous day.

"I've got a bad habit of automatically barring men from my field of vision...Hey you, come here a moment."

The gate guard, his eyes still wide open, shuffled his way over.

"What's your name and rank?"

"Y, yes sir! My name is Milan. I'm a knight-in-training, General."

"I see, Milan. Did you see that just now?"

"Yeah, well....."

Smiling broadly Rain clasped Milan on the shoulder.

"Hey, Milan. Let me tell you a scary story. It's one of the scariest I've ever heard."

"N, no thanks, I don't really care for..."

"Just listen."

Rain silenced the taught-faced Milan with the glint in his eye before continuing.

"It's a story I know of a knight-in-training, let's call him M...One day, M came to witness, coincidentally, a secret of the lord he serves. He was, you know, quite talkative, and happily told that secret to someone else."

Even though Milan's face was icy cold, sweat was pouring down.

"W, what happened to M?"

He asked, his face pale. His lips had turned violet.

Rain shook his head in an exaggerated motion, before speaking in a tragic tone.

"It was such a tragedy, so frightening. As punishment, every day he had to clean the lavatory, his duties as gate guard were extended five years, his wages were halved and what's more, he never had another chance to go out into the rest of the world. Quite a frightening story, wouldn't you agree?"

"It's frightening! Terribly frightening!"

Milan nodded, his teeth clattering.

His face went from pale to ghostly white. Rain continued to gaze intently into his eyes.

He then said in a low voice,

"So, I'll return to my first question. Did you just now, witness anything out of the ordinary?"

"I only saw the General leave properly through the front entrance!"

Milan responded, his voice starting to develop a sobbing quality.

"Well, it seems we have an understanding. The future captain of a thousand, that will be you, M!"

Clapping him firmly on the shoulder, Rain left the stupefied Milan behind, walking off in a good mood.

.....I might be serving someone totally amazing...

Milan, standing straight as a pole, thought as he watched the back of the castle lord heading off.

As though nothing had happened, Rain hummed happily as he continued towards the courtyard.

Cortecreas Castle had an elite plumbing system installed, but there was also a standard water well.
Rain went around the back of the castle, bent on washing his face before he left. It was at the well that he met his new guest.

The young girl was wiping her long damp hair dry with a towel...Her hair glittered golden in the light of the sun which had just begun its ascent.

The pure white dress she wore suited her very well. It was one of many outfits Rain had ordered be prepared for her. Reflecting Rain's interests, the hem of the skirt was quite short.

"Yo, little one!"

Rain greeted Shelfa in a manner most unbefitting for a Princess.

"Rain!"

A smile spread across the face of the girl.

Her joy overflowed from her entire body, and throwing the towel aside Shelfa rushed up to him.

"Good morning! I'm so glad I could meet you so early in the morning."

"Y, yeah."

Her words caused even Rain to be at a loss for a moment. Her perfectly clear azul eyes sparkled brightly as she stretched out a hand to firmly hold his.

--Did I do something to cause me to be so well liked?

"You know, you're actually above me in rank, but the fact we can spend time together like in the past is nice."

"There's no reason you need say such a thing, even if that is the case..."

Her smile faded somewhat.

"Perhaps, you are still mad at me?"

"Not a chance. If it's about that, then I've already heard your situation, and I don't mind. It was only
for confirmation."

"I'm so relieved..."

"Only, in front of every one else we should speak as Princess and vassal. Luckily, I can sense people's presence, so there shouldn't be a problem right now."

"I..."

Shelfa furrowed her brow.

"I want to be able to speak plainly with you all the time. Also, about me taking the place of my father..."

"We talked about that yesterday, didn't we? The next in line who has the claim to the throne is you. The former king never had a son after all. Thinking of the morale of the troops, we need someone we can look to as a leader. At the very least I need you to hold out until after this battle is finished."

Rain lectured, pulling up the bucket with a rattling sound and washing his face.

Beside Rain, Shelfa spoke.

"If you will help me, I will bear the throne...But for you to change your speech due to our positions..."

"You don't like it?"

Shelfa nodded. Her beautiful eyes gazed up at him.

Even so, this was the only way. At the very least Rain's position was below hers.

"Hmm, I'm at a bit of a loss then. Oh, I'll be borrowing the towel for a moment."

"U, uhm...I just used it..."

"Well that's alright then. Don't mind it."

Rain calmly dried his face with the towel. There was the faint scent of flowers.

"Let's leave the discussion about the throne and my polite speech for after we've taken care of

this. There are a great many aiming for the throne that will come out of the woodwork later. If it comes down to it, you can always just push it off on one of them."

Hanging the towel over the edge of the well, Rain looked carefully at Shelfa. She didn't seem to be too accepting of this proposal.

"...Well, geez. Don't think so hard on it. I know, how about we go for a bit of a ride together, to change the mood?"

"Eh?"

Shelfa lifted her face, surprised.

"Is it alright for me to go outside?"

"What's that about? Are you not feeling well or something? Now that I think about it, you do seem a little thin. Does you hurt anywhere in particular?"

"Ah, that's not it. I've never been allowed to go outside before, so I was only a little surprised."

"--I see."

Rain nodded heavily, gently touching the side of Shelfa's face, causing her snow-white cheeks to redden.

"Forget everything up until now, alright? The you right now is the leader of this country. Nobody can tell you what to do. If you want to do something, then go ahead and do it."

"Then, I have a request!"

Shelfa's eyes sparkled.

"From now on, is it alright for me to remain by your side? To always be by yourside, and never leave...!"

--Why did it turn out like this?

Rain was slightly taken aback by the force of her wish, but at the moment he couldn't refuse her.

There was no helping it.

"...If that is what you want."

He said it.

"I'm so glad...I'm really, really happy!"

Shelfa said, as she nestled her head into Rain's chest.

Her voice overflowed with delight.

At that moment Rain though he may have given his permission a little too soon.

"Woah, hold on a moment. Don't get so happy over such a small thing. For now, let's just head out on that ride, okay?"

"Yes, of course. If I can be together with you."

"Alright. Guess I'd best call Chris."

Putting two fingers to his mouth, Rain let out a loud and robust whistle.

They only waited for a moment.

His partner, Chris, came trotting over.

"Amazing! She comes when you call!"

"Well, yeah. She is my partner after all."

"Her coat is more beautiful than any I've seen before. It's so white."

Lovingly petting Chris, Shelfa enjoyed herself thoroughly. It seemed Chris too had taken a liking to her, as she wasn't her usual aggitated self.

Watching her from behind was quite pleasant...

But, just how can I explain this feeling of pressure?

Rain thought to himself, watching Shelfa who was engrossed with Chris.

He could clearly remember the feeling. It was the same as when he had first met Shelfa that time in the garden, he had felt the same intense force.

When he had lowered his humming and closed in on the source to identify who it was, he had lost his strength upon seeing it was only a young, beauty of a girl.

He hadn't paid it much heed at the time, but it really was strange. For someone who had never learned swordsmanship (as she had mentioned the previous day), he simply couldn't identify the reason for the pressure he felt from this novice girl.

It's not possible she was hiding her strength--was it?

If so, then she didn't let out even the faintest hint of it.....

Maybe I'll give it a test.

Rain put his hand over the scabbard which housed his magical blade, calling Shelfa in a calm manner.

"Hey, little one."

"Yes?"

Ceasing her petting of the horse, Shelfa turned around.

It was at that instant.

He purposefully let out a killing intent as, at a speed which made the movement seem hazy, he swung his Demonic Blade towards her. If the opponent wasn't a seasoned veteran, they wouldn't be able to dodge it.

The blue light flashed like lightning.

“Woah!"

Rain said, but there was almost no response.

He somehow managed to stop the blade a fraction of an inch from the neck of a mildly startled Shelfa.

T, that was really close. That almost ended up a beheading.

He broke into a cold sweat.

"My, this is a magical sword, isn't it? You're letting me see it?"

Not even in her wildest dreams would she have thought she was about to be killed. That was her state as she stretched out a white hand in deep curiosity.

"Woah! You can't touch the blade like that, you'll get injured."

"Ah...you're right. I've never even held a sword before, so I just..."

Shelfa said, looking apologetic.

It didn't seem like she would be saying "Actually, I'm quite strong," at any time soon.

It seemed this puzzle would continue for a while longer.

Castle Cortecreas was surrounded by woods and meadows, with cultivated land spattered across the countryside. It definitely did not appear to be the center of the Astel region.

This was because while any normal town was usually situated at the foot of a castle, his was located at a place a small distance away. He had purposefully done this when constructing the

castle to keep them seperate should the flames of war come calling.

Old ladies were stooped over picking at the vegetation in the cultivated areas, and it seemed the threat of Zarmine was all but forgotten here.

"It's so peaceful."

Shelfa said into Rain's arm.

They were both riding atop Chris, so that was how things turned out.

Sitting astride the saddle together, they were stacked like two spoons on one another.

Rain had suggested preparing another mount for her, but she had wished for them to ride together.

I really must be quite well liked. All I did was hang out with her for a little while, though.

Rain thought to himself.

If he brought this girl back to his home in the sticks, just what would his parents say...

"*My goodness. This is the first time your mother has seen an honest-to-God princess. Let's me make up a batch of cookies now.*".....surely his mother would say something like that.
"*You took down a princess, did you now!*" Rain's delinquint of a father would say, laughing heartily.

.....Thinking about it now, my parents might be a little strange...

"Rain, uhm..."

"Hmm? What's up?"

Rain was brought back to reality by Shelfa, who seemed to have something important on her mind.
It appeared she had come to an important decision--and spoke the certain resolution she had come to in a soft voice.

"I said I wanted us to be together forever a moment ago...but from now on if you feel you are in any kind of danger, please leave me and get to safety. Rain, you staying safe is the most important thing to me."

Her tone of voice was very calm, but Rain couldn't agree with it.

"Your such a..."

Rain said into the golden hair below his eyes.

"...Ah."

"There's no 'ah' about it. That's quite conceited, you know."

Rain said, scolding Shelfa who had looked up at him with a shocked expression.

"You're the one who asked if you could stay by my side, so it's alright if you understand this. You've got a genius like me on your side, so you should rely on me a little more."

"But if Rain is--"

"There's no buts about it. If you don't like me then say it clearly. That's why, until I deny a request, you can rely on me as much as you'd like. --After all, you're different from King Douglas."

With the hands holding onto the reigns, Rain hugged her to him.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to do anything for your father. I'll only apologize to you. I would have thought about it a little harder if I'd know he was your father."

"Don't let it trouble you."

With an expression which showed her complete trust in him, she sank her delicate form deeper into his arms.

"My father's death was his own fault, and his alone. More than anything, I am happy that you've said I could rely on you..."

There wasn't a hint of uncertainty in those words.

Unable to voice a response, Rain could only put more strength in his arms which held Shelfa.

Having talked for so long, they had come quite a ways.

They had gone through one forest, and another spread out before them. It was at that moment that he noticed a cloud of dust rising, and he could make out a group of men astride horses in it.

Rain's vision was excellent, and he could even make out their bodies covered in leather armor, and the long swords which hung at their waists. All of this led him to the conclusion that they were fighters.

When they spotted Rain and Shelfa, they brought their whips down on the horses, increasing their speed. Rain could feel the desire to kill emanating from tightly-drawn faces.

"Let's see that's one, two...about twenty I'd say. Wonder what their aim is... Then again, maybe they want the both of us dead."

Rain said, calmly.

"Rain?"

"Shelfa, it would seem we've got company."

"Wha...?"

After hearing Rain's statement, it seems she finally noticed the approaching group.

"They are...?"

"Assassins."

"...No!"

Shelfa stiffened atop the saddle. It was an obvious reaction given the circumstances. There weren't many people that could remain calm when their lives were in danger.

"You aren't running?"

"Well, I could do that, but within my boundaries I can't have such a group as them running free now, can I?"

"But...I just couldn't bear to see you get hurt."

"Please. There's no chance I'd be killed by such a large group as that."

"Are you...certain?"

Shelfa turned her body around, looking up at Rain. It was an unnecessary worry for Rain. Even so, he responded energetically.

"Of course! If I was in the mood for it, I could take on a thousand without any trouble!"

"Oh my..."

Shelfa's already large eyes opened even wider. Her face was filled with surprise and respect.

Looking at that expression, Rain nearly fell off Chris.

You didn't believe that just now, did you?

I'm going to have to think twice before I randomly say something to her...Well, I guess it's alright for now. It's not like I told her some scary horror story.

I guess I'd better warn her for now.

"Hey, little one."

"Yes?"

"You see, you can't go around believing everything someone tells you. --Of course, I'm an exception."

"Then there is no need to worry. By nature I'm very prone to doubting, after all."

Shelfa laughed innocently.

"There is only one person I trust from the bottom of my heart, and that is you, Rain."

"I s, see..."

"Okay."

Still leaning comfortably against Rain, Shelfa nodded firmly.

There were other problems inherent in not believing anyone else, but upon remembering how she had lived until only recently, he could see why she might feel that way. After all, King Douglas had been quite coldhearted in dealing with his daughter.

"Okay."

While they had been talking, the approaching assassins had nearly closed in.

Rain pulled back on the reigns, bringing Chris to a halt, before dropping elegantly to the ground.

"Well then, I'll be right back. Stay here and watch together with Chris."

"Okay."

No longer objecting, she nodded obediently.

However, she took Rain's hand in her own slender one, speaking to him in a natural and matter-of-fact tone.

"I pray for your fortune in battle. --If by any chance something were to happen to you, I am prepared for what will happen then."

It was at that moment Rain came to realize something.

That something was just how deep and pure her feelings towards him were.

Geez. Little one, you're really overestimating me...

Watching Rain approach, the men dismounted.

Swords were not yet drawn, but their desire to do so was clearly evident within the glint of their eyes.

At the very least, it was plain they weren't here to make friends.

Putting on a rather refreshing smile, he drew closer without acting hostile.

When he had grown close enough for all of them to see each others' faces clearly, he stopped, raising his hand in a light-hearted manner.

"Hallo! Great weather today, ain't it?"

Silence.

The men were all staring at Rain as an alley cat might upon the passing of a human.

Some even seemed to be saying 'Is this guy for real?' One of the men stepped forward.

"There no mistakin' him?"

"Yeah. This is the same bold smiling face we were shown through Magic Vision."

An important looking youth in the very back responded. He had a round face that seemed as though it hadn't been washed in a quite a while.

"It's just, he really seems quite young...Is he really twenty-five?"

Ignoring the one who had raised the question, Rain spoke.

"You know, I've got something I'd like to discuss with you. Could you listen and not get all hot-blooded?"

They all looked at Rain as though they thought he were the cheekiest brat they'd ever met. Still smiling, Rain continued.

"That rumor about me being the strongest in the world is true, but it's not like I enjoy killing people. Even if I killed all of you I wouldn't get a single copper coin. Well, I suppose it would do the rest of the world a favor, I suppose."

Rain's voice was nonchalant as he gave a once-over of the men. His expression seemed to hide a poisonous side. He nodded to himself before continuing on.

"Only, I do feel it'd be best if we could clean this up without spilling any blood. I've no idea who hired you, but it's hopeless. That's why I'll give you one option. I'll pretend I never saw you, if you clear out of my land right away...I told you not to get angry, didn't I!?"

The expressions of all the assassins changed entirely.

The killing intent radiating from them had grown even thicker.

The man at the front spat on the ground.

"Messin' around...It'd be best if a guy like you weren' around no more."

Rain withdrew his smile, letting out a soft sigh.

"Actually, I feel the same way."

In the next moment,

Rain shifted abruptly, seeming to blur with the speed of the motion.

He vanished from their field of vision in an instant, and at an incredible speed he closed the distance between them, appearing directly in front of the group.

By the time the men finished processing the action, he was right before their eyes.

First was the man who had stood at the front. Rain's magical sword sliced diagonally down from the shoulder. The blade became a diagonal flash of blue, as it easily severed through bone.

The leather armor was no more use than a sheet of paper. Fresh blood sprayed from the cut. Before the blood could even spill onto the ground, the sword went left and right, cutting flesh and opening a fountain of blood.

Each time, the gleaming aura of magic sliced through the sky, leaving a pale blue impression.

It was almost laughable how the assassins fell one after another. Rain's speed was too quick, leaving them no time to use the advantage of numbers they had.

Darting around like the wind, no one was able to catch him. They were dropped one after another as though they were immobile dolls.

The afterglow of the blue sword was so phantasmal, the image was burned into the eyes of the assassins.

Those left standing gulped, their faces turned gaunt.

"...A Demon Blade! S, spread out! He's more than we expected!"

"You're too late, half-wit."

Before the eyes of the man who had yelled, an afterimage solidified.

Without saying, it was Rain.

"--Gahh!"

By the time the man, sword in hand, who had warned the others realized it, Rain had cut into his heart with the stroke of a sword before he could do anything in retaliation, ending his life.

With a speed that made him appear blurred, Rain withdrew his sword from the man, sinking his next assalaint into a sea of blood.

About this time the enemy finally started to move.

Burning with anger, two men came at him from his left and right. There were most likely mercenaries whose arms were good. Well trained, they aimed for Rain's vitals at a very skilled speed.

But what they cut was only a shadow -- nothing more than Rain's afterimage.

He anazlyzed the movement of their blades in a matter of milliseconds, dodging the deadly attack.

As though victory had rejected them, their swords only drew an arc through empty space.

Rain avoided the two swinging longswords with only minimal movement, while at the same time twirling his Demon Blade in his right hand.

The neck of one, and the chest of the other were cut open, and they dropped to the ground.

Continuing where they left off, another assassin jumped in.

"Uwaa! --Uoah!"

Rain dodged the attack, and a flash of blue dove into the assailent's neck. Fresh blood spouted out.

Without waiting to see the result of his attack, Rain attacked another behind him with a backswing.

"--Gah!"

The man managed to bring his sword just in time to block the fatal blow. Yet fiery sparks flew as the sword, unable to stand up to the force of the Demon Blade, was cut through.

Without a decrease in speed the Demon Blade continued into his chest.

With a fountain of blood spewing from him, the man fell backwards. As though following it's master, his sword dropped to the earth beside him.

Without turning around Rain swung to his rear.

He caught one who had tried to circle around him accurately, cutting into his neck. With a gurggling sound the man flew backwards to land by the side of the path.

But by that time Rain had already moved on to his next prey.

Rain seemed to dance through the twenty assassins. Every time his Demon Blade swung through the air, another scream followed as someone dropped to the ground bleeding.

They had no chance. Unable to keep pace with Rain's movements, they were unable to make use of their numbers.

The path was wide enough for them to take a surrounding technique, but they just couldn't keep up with the speed.

Rain beat them in speed, sword drawing, physical strength and even in courage. At this rate, it couldn't even be considered a fair fight.

No feeling of tension showed on his face.

Whether they wanted to admit it or not, the men came to realize that Rain was still taking it easy.

About ten seconds after engagement had begun, they had already dropped to half their orignial numbers.

"Shit. We'd finally gotten such a large group together because of the commision.....This guy's a monster!"

A tall man with a tight face in the back of the group said with in a dismayed tone.

The leader's fear and weakness was open for the rest to see, and the rest of the assassins who had determinedly continued the fruitless assault now backed up. They traded pale glances among themselves.

"Hey, what's wrong? Where'd all that spirit you had a moment ago dissapear to?"

Rain ceased his offense, swinging the Demon Blade over his shoulder and even giving a light yawn.

He wasn't even breathing heavily as they witnessed his unbelievably inexhaustible stamina.

"I'm still willing to overlook this little matter. I'll give you one more chance, so run!"

"W, what'd you say!? Don't get all high and mightly just 'cause you've got yerself a Demon Blade! Men, hurry up and attack!"

Only the leader spoke out so firmly; the rest seemed to be of a differing opinion. They slowly began backing away from Rain.

"Ah, so that's how it's gonna be, huh. Well if you want to die so badly I won't stop you."

With that last word he made his move, and at that moment with a frightening speed the men lept for their horses.

"Hey! What's the meaning of this!? Hey! Get back here!"

Not one responded to the leader's commands. They all jumped on their horses and, without looking back, galloped off. With a great tumult the horses of the dead men chased after them as though in a fright.

The only one who lost his chance to flee was the thick-faced man who had just lost all of his men.

"Waaaaaaaah!!!"

The man's stressed cry continued for a while.

"Well now, what should I do with you."

Rain pointed a devilish look at the thick-faced man.

He grew deathly pale. It was almost comical the way sweat started to pour down his face. He turned his eyes away.

In a high-pitched yet small voice, he spoke.

"D, don't get upset.....we didn't mean you any harm."

"Didn't mean me any harm? Are you spacing out or something? You must really have a death wish, right?"

Rain lifted the Demon Blade above his head.

"Woah! Wait! Don't be so hasty. You'll understand if you let me speak! I did nothing wrong. T, the prime minister g, gave me an order. That's why....Ah."

All of a sudden the sweaty, thick-faced man started cut himself off. His small eyes widened as his gaze turned to something behind Rain.

"Rain! Are you hurt anywhewre?"

Deeply concerned Rain turned around to see Shelfa trailing Chris, as she walked towards him while
purposefully avoiding looking at the corpses around her.

"Now just a moment. I told you not to move."

"I'm so sorry. But, Chris started to walk so.....But Rain, you're ever so strong."

Shelfa looked up at him with respect in her eyes.

It would seem her admiration had won over her fear for the moment.

"Well, you know. I'm a genius after all."

Letting out a quick chuckle, Rain brushed his hair aside.

"...Who's the girl?"

The thick-faced man asked feverishly, dousing Rain in verbal water.

"It's got nothing to do with you! Her destiny has kept her from you until now, and from here on she will continue to have no fate that includes you. Don't look so casually, you'll dirty her with your oggling!"

"Y, you don't have to go that far!"

"Yes I do! Besides, do you really think you're in a position to be asking me questions?"

With Rain bringing his blade up to make contact with the man's throat, he started to shake, trying to raise his hands. But remembering he was still holding his sword, he hurriedly tossed it aside.

His hands shot up.

"I get it! Please, forgive me! I was only doing as I was told. It was the prime minister, he gave the request to the assassins guild, he's the one you should be upset with!"

"...Try being a little more specific, would you."

"I only accepted the request the other day. The assassination order was handed down directly from King Leygur, according to what he said. So, the one at the head of that order is King Leygur himself!"

"Hmph. A woman is one thing, but for a man to aim at me with such vengeance... It's a century too early, if I don't say so myself."

Rain scrunched up his face.

"King Leygur plans to...assassinate Rain..."

With a level of worry far beyond shock, Shelfa clung to Rain's arm. Conveying to her it was nothing she need be concerened over, Rain smiled gently at her. After all, it wasn't the first time he had been the target of hostile intent.

"So, are we square? You'll let me go, right?"

"Your quite a stuffy fellow, you know. What with your men all scattered....Ah."

Rain caught himself in mid-sentance, looking towards the forest before him and furrowing his brow.

There was another cloud of dust. Another group of roughly ten men were coming this way at a full gallop.

"Haah! Hahaha!"

The moment he saw that, the thick-faced man seemed to have been revitalized.

As though his menial demeanor had been wiped clean, he now wore an expression that showed how full of himself he was.
"Take a look at that! They're on my side! Thinking something like this might happen, I increased the number of men much more than that requested by the prime minister. How about them apples, eh?"

"Are you really that stupid?"

Rain responded acutely.

"If twenty people couldn't stand up to me before, what makes you think ten will do you any good now?"

At that, the thick-faced man's haughtiness disappeared. It seemed he had just realized he'd overlooked that detail...

"...Geez. On such a fine morning as this, a bunch of men keep streaming in. I can't take it any more. Maybe I'll just use that technique..."

Letting out his grievances in an upset tone, he removed himself from Shelfa's hold, lifting his Demon Blade far above his head.

Paying no heed to the discomfort shown in both the man and the girl, Rain forcefully dropped his sword.

The blade which was giving off a bluish-white aura left a path as it cut through the air.

For an instant it seemed the space itself had been ruptured--and far off where the advancing group was approaching, the men seemed to lean backwards.

It was as though they had actually received a powerful blow head on.

From within the group of assassins, several of them dropped from their mounts, spewing blood.

In a flury of uncertainty the other men stopped their horses. They were looking around at their surroundings.

"That was me, dolts. Hurry up and realize it. ...Guess I'm gonna have to do it again...One, two three!"

Dropping his blade the same as before in a tone that made him seem as though he were playing around, one man fell from his horse. It seemed they finally understood the one doing this was Rain.
After pointing in Rain's direction and exchanging hurried words, they turned their mounts around and ran off.

"It would have been best if you'd all done that from the beginning, you know."

Rain said, tiredly. Completely opposite to the composed Rain, the thick-faced man had lost all color in his face. They had come to understand what it meant to face a Demon Blade from that last attack.

"Eh, a long-distance attack...I never would have thought that sword....c, cou, cou...c"

"What are you, a rooseter? You want to say this is the 'Siren's Blade,' don't you?"

"H, how can you say that with such composure!?"

The thick-faced man's bearded face was alight with fear.

He thrust out a shaking finger in Rain's direction.

"Do you have any friggin' idea how dangerous a blade that is!? Where in the world did you come across it!?"

"Don't get your fur in a bunch. It's not like I'm telling you to use it or anything."
Rain said firmly, closing the topic.

--There were no inscriptions on the blade.

Neither was there any record of who had imbued the blade with its magical properties.

The only record of the blade still around, goes back to a distant time, more than a thousand years previous.

Around that time, a small country known as Celestia flourished in the desert at the center of the continent.

It was a small country of five-thousand, where the nation was more like a town in size. Yet, because its center was an oasis, the country was quite prosperous.

That is, until one blistering summer day.

On that day, a lone stranger set foot in the peaceful country of Celestia.

Even to this day no one knew what business had drawn him to that place.

All that was known, was that this man who's eyes gleamed like a demon's had without warning, begun to slaughter the townspeople.

He had done it with a Demon Blade held in one hand, which gave off a blue, magical aura.

Any one that was in his field of vision, no matter the distance, could be attacked. That was the blade he wielded, and the power it possessed. One by one the men who tried to stop him fell to the blade until at last, at the gates of the palace the soldiers came out to face him.

By the time they finally succeeded in killing the murderous demon of a man, according to the legend, over one-thousand people, including the townsfolk, had been massacred.

Of course, there is the possibility the numbers were exagerated. However, what is undeniable is that the Demon Blade stole a countless number of lives.

What was most saddening, was that among the victims was the Kingdom's crown prince, who had been leading the soldiers.

After losing his only son, the King who had been full of wisdom fell into grief and finally died in madness.

The King's bloodline ended, yet the story of despair continued. An internal revolution took place and brother spilt the blood of brother. Finally, the Kingdom of Celestia was raided by savages and ceased to exist.

The beautiful town was raized to the ground, and had never been rebuilt since.

...After that, people began to fear the existance of the Demon Blade which had brought about the destruction of the country, and soon everyone began calling it the 'Siren's Blade.'
This evily-named demonic blade which had been lost from the pages of history centuries previous, had been found by Rain some years ago, deep underground in long-forgotten ruins.

"Y, you're quite a guy...! If I had only known someone like you would be my target, no matter how much I'd been offered or how many people accompanied me, I'd never have gotten involved with you!"

The thick-faced man cried out. His expression was a mixture of fear and regret.

"That doesn't concern me, fool."

Rain cut in, interrupting the man's rant.

"Putting that aside for the moment, you aren't thinking you'll be able to get out of this now,

are you? My Demon Blade here craves blood, you see."

The blueish-white blade gave off the faint sound of buzzing insects, as he brought it around to the neck of the thick-faced man. The overwhelming effectiveness of that action caused the man to start to sweat heavily.

"P, please help me! I've no idea about anything other than what I've already told you! There's eight, fifteen kids waiting for me to come home! Please, forvie me, I'm begging you!"

"T, this guy. You can lie pretty easily, you know."

Aggitated, Rain swung his sword back.

"Besdies, your math doesn't add up! So just die already!"

"Uwaa! Y, you've got it wrong! There's one group of triplets, and several twins---!"

"Geez, that's so troublesome! Just go to the realm of the dead like a man!"

"Ah, help meeee!"

Hopping up, the thick-faced man turned his back on Rain and took off like the wind.

He may have some skill, but it seemed he was simply too pleasant a guy.

After he had shrunk into the distance, the thick faced man started to run in a zig-zag pattern. Most likely he was trying to avoid the long-distance attack. Even if he did that, it wouldn't make much difference to the 'invisible slash' of the Siren's Blade.

The only way to avoid it was to dodge it with luck the moment before the strike would connect.

"He's really a guy that makes people laugh."

Without the slightest intention of sending an attack after him, Rain slid his sword back into his scabbard, turning to look at Shelfa.

Melancholic eyes stared bak at him.

Her brows which made a beautiful arc, were currently furrowed with worry.

"What's wrong, little one?"

"It is alright, isn't it? Oh, please say that it is."

"Huh?"

At Rain's response, Shelfa stretched out her hand to Rain before speaking.

"Even being attacked by the King of another country, even having the Siren's Blade with you...Rain, you will be okay, won't you? You haven't been injured, right? ...You won't ever leave me all alone, right?"

"...A fool of a girl you are for thinking that. Of course I won't. There's no way I'd lose to the likes of them. Rest assured, even this sword depends on who's wielding it. There's no sin in the blade itself."

".....I believe it, those words."

It took some time before Shelfa lifted her face, showing him a smile.

"Rain, will you teach me swordsmanship sometime?"

"Eh...? What for?"

"I don't want to be a stumbling block to you. More than just staying by your side, I want to become a girl worthy of you, even if only by a little bit."

Shelfa said, with a voice like two glasses clinking together.

He was really at a loss.

Wrapping his arm around Shelfa's thin waist, he was at an uncommon loss for words.

.....Am I really someone who can receive such words from such a girl? Even though all I am is just someone who's spent their entire life with strength as their objective...

"Rain?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll teach you. But in return, you need to learn how to cook. A girl who can't would be quite a problem after all."

"Yes, most definitely! I'll work so hard I won't lose, Rain."

"...Now just a moment, you think someone like me would work hard?"

Rain pulled back, shocked.

Shelfa simply looked at him with her kind gaze.

"I never once doubted in your genius ability. But I'm sure you also went through some very difficult training."

Just then, as Rain was about to open his mouth in protest, Shelfa grabbed his hands.

"The first time we met, when you held my hand, I wondered to myself why your hands could be so hard. ...I realized it while thinking about it a little later. That it was the result of many blisters and sores. Because you are always holding your sword... That's why your palms are this hard.

--Am I wrong?"

Rain came to realize what it meant to be at a loss for words that day.

That was exactly how it was, and there was no room to downplay it.

Pulling himself back together, Rain matched his response to her statement of working hard.

"Fool, you shouldn't harden such soft hands. It'll just depress me when I hold them..."

That retort was all he could muster.

Geez, it wasn't just her outward appearance, but what was on the inside as well. She might really have what it takes to be royalty.

"You're really impressive, little one."

"Eh?"

Shelfa tilted her head cutely to the side.

"No, nevermind. Shall we head back soon? Xenoa is probably running around crazy about now."

"Okay."

Nodding with a smile on her face, she pitter-pattered over to Chris.

Looking at her from behind, Rain spoke silently.

If the true identity of that pressure you give off is due to your latent abilities...
Then Shelfa, you're the real genius.

--Not a sham, like I am...